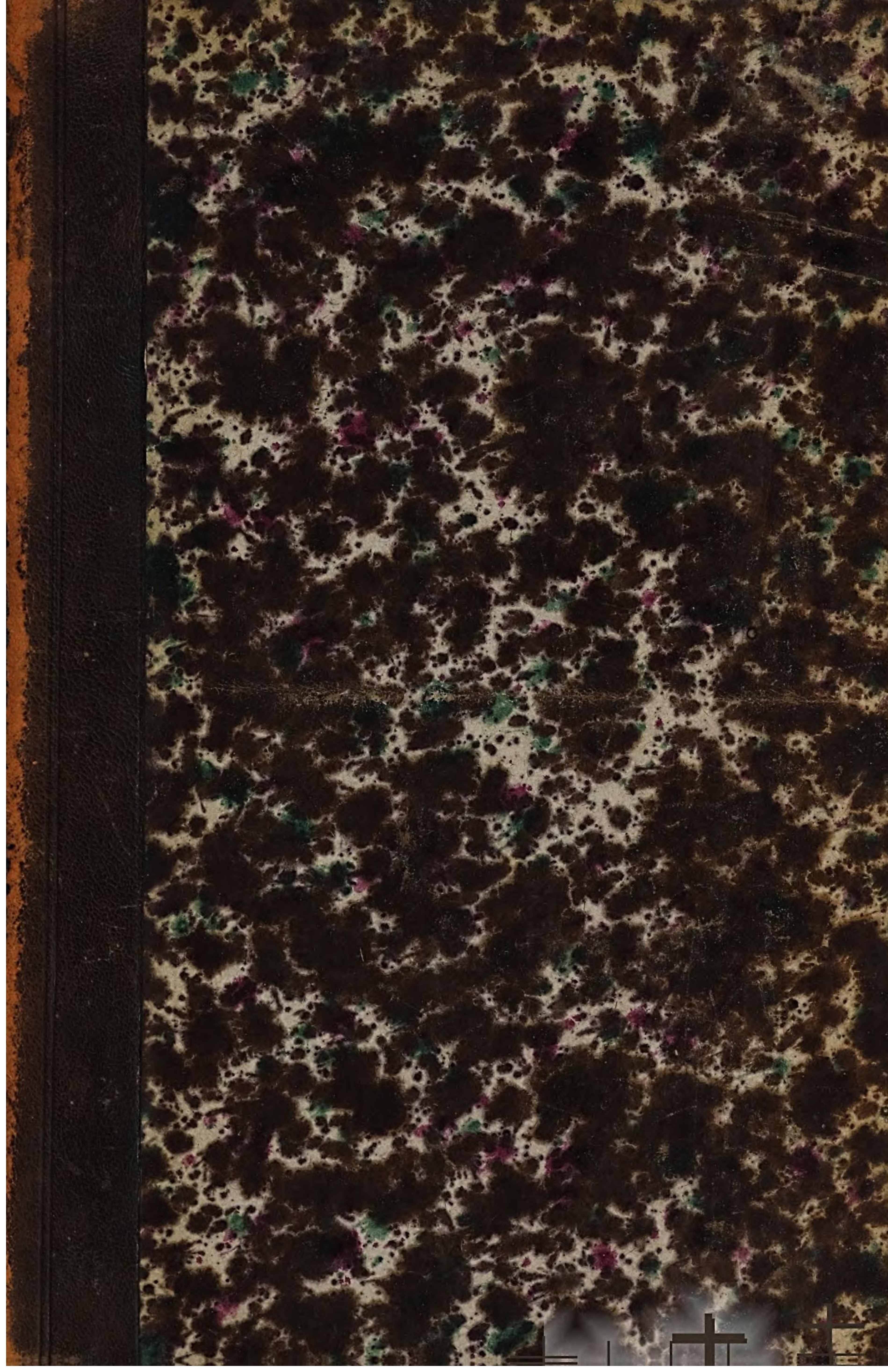




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A Story of the Northern Border

BY

ROSA MACKENZIE KETTLE,
AUTHOR OF 'THE RANGER'S LODGE', 'LA BELLE MARIE', 'OVER THE
FURZE', 'HILLESSEN ON THE MOORS', &c., &c., &c.

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KARL GRÄDENER & J. F. RICHTER.

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'Fly from the crowd and dwell with steadfastness;
Suffice thine own estate, though it be small;
For horde brings hate and climbing doubtfulness;
Covet no more than God behoves thee fall;
Pressure breeds malice, wealth is sought by all.
Rule well thyself if thou wouldst others lead,
And Truth shall deliver, it is no drede.'

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1881.



PART THE FIRST.

SOUTH OF THE CHEVIOTS.

CHAPTER I.

“Tweed said to Till,
‘What gars ye rin sae still?’
Till said to Tweed,
‘Though ye rin wi’ speed
And I rin slaw,
Yet, where ye drown ae man,
I drown twa.’”

I WISH I could make you see the great Moors on the English side of Carter Fell as they appeared to me when I was a lad, scarcely big enough to ride the huge cart-horses belonging to the Northumbrian farm where I was reared. That is the right word—I was not brought up tenderly, as the poorest peasant's son may be at his mother's knee, but reared, like the young colts which kicked out at me viciously.

I have seen a great deal of the Northern Moors since that time, but then I had nothing by which to measure them. Infinite space seemed to lie around me, steeped in mist or bathed in moonlight. As I crept under some stone-heap to eat my frugal meal, with sharp showers driving past and over my lowly shelter, the rolling waste around me, bounded by the clouded heavens, was the only world I knew.

When I was twelve years old, my prospects brightened. My father's sister, the only one who survived him, came to take care of her orphan nephew. She had been living with a lady near Jedburgh—a distant connection—as trusted friend and companion; and as, on the Scottish side of the Border, family ties count more than in England, the difference in their social state was almost forgotten.

Aunt Jessica at once took possession of a small homestead on the verge of the Moor, where her parents and my own had resided; and from that hour till her death we lived happily there together. This little property, dwelling-house, crofts, orchard and garden, belonged to me; and my Aunt cleared off a mortgage which a succession of bad harvests had obliged my father to lay upon the small farm which also called him master.

As a reward for faithful service, my Aunt's former mistress and friend had left her a sufficient legacy to make her independent, and enough

remained when the debt on my inheritance was cleared off to enable her to purchase some adjoining land. For a time, however, I continued to work for Farmer Hurst; going home in the evenings, and always spending the Sabbath under our own roof.

I can see my Aunt still, as plainly as ever; for my boyish pictures were few and strongly painted. She was a tall, thin, elderly woman, of grave aspect; who moved about quietly, and seldom spoke or smiled, and always wore, winter and summer, morning and evening, a large black bonnet. It was a pleasant shade, she said, in the hot summer days, when she was scarcely ever indoors; and in the wild weather, which often rattled our old casement panes and shook the walls of our dwelling on the Northern Moors, it kept off draughts.

To this beloved relative I owe the greater part of my boyish acquirements; all the scholarship which did not come to me self-taught or from my free communion with nature.

Jessica Forbes was a great reader. On the shelf in the parlour were, besides our Bibles, Prayer- and Hymn-books, several volumes which had been gifts from her kind friend and mistress, and some which she had purchased for herself. I believe I could repeat most part of their contents now—some of them from end to end—but I will spare you even their names. You might laugh at the

simple catalogue; and to me it is sacred. I question whether any books I have since read have taught me as much as I learned while tending sheep on the hill-side, with the volume spread open on the grass; spelling it word for word, and arriving at some meaning or other as I pondered over each page. In the long winter evenings my Aunt taught me to write and keep accounts. I had no other teacher.

Over and over again as I lay among the everlasting hills I read the Book of Job. When it grew too dark to distinguish the letters, I used to look up at the sky and try to guess which was Arcturus and many a shining constellation, wondering what was meant by their shouting for joy. A star shooting from the zenith seemed to answer me. Another and another August or November meteor followed in the gloaming. A planet trembled above the hill-top. I seemed to realise that there was a joy beyond the joys of earth in those realms of light.

The stars were my clock, and I wanted no compass as I wended my darkling way home. Each point of light had a name by which I knew it as well as if I had studied astronomy for years. Sometimes I hit upon the right one, either learning it from the Bible or through some chance observation. Be that as it may, right or wrong, I read the heavens—as I read my Aunt's books—from

end to end and then back again, and I never forgot the lesson.

One other thing I learnt, worth all that life has taught me since. I got it by heart, and I have never forgotten it. That wonderful story which began when shepherds, like those who tended flocks on the Moor, saw the bright star in the East. Was it the one I so often watched rising above the great green hill, crowned by a camp, where I had read that a great battle was once fought? I thought so, and that was enough, since no one troubled himself to contradict me. That wonderful story of One humbly born, to all appearance, like myself, and with nowhere to lay His head, yet growing to be greater than the greatest earthly monarch; now carrying the tender lambs who gave me so much trouble on February nights; now bearding the conquerors of the world and the High Priest of God's chosen people. From the Manger of Bethlehem to the Cross on Calvary; from the dread temptation hour in the desert to the struggle in the Garden, where He was left alone to bear His burden, I followed Him step by step, syllable by syllable, picturing to myself the Hills of Judea, the Fords of Jordan, the stable, with the lowing sweet-breathed kine, the mighty darkness like that which sometimes fell upon me suddenly among the hills; I went on making every image real by the force of an uncorrupted fancy,

and comparing what I read with what I saw, alone with Nature, on the Moors.

The Saviour's parables came home to me like the words of a parent. The seed dropped on stony ground! Why, it lay all around us—arid, ungrateful to the tiller.—The wandering sheep, sought for and found at last with pain and difficulty, therefore more valued than all the fold which went not astray. How often I had searched the lone wild hills bordering on the waste, for stragglers from the flock! Even before I understood their meaning the pictures were plainly before me, and I puzzled out the rest; diving deep into their hidden significance, as those alone decipher mysteries who read few books and think upon them long and often, as I did in the silence of the hills, with the light shining down upon the page from heaven uninterrupted, making illumination in the heart.

There were men working upon the farm from whom I took likenesses for the Saviour's followers. One who bore patiently with me, and sometimes explained the meaning of a difficult passage, was John, the beloved disciple. Another, a young man who kept the books straight for Farmer Hurst, I fancied to be like Matthew, busy with the collection of customs. Another I named Peter—rash but generous—a word and a blow—all passion one minute, penitence the next. The carter, crafty and designing, who often made me suffer for some

fault or negligence of his own, laying blame where it was not due and avoiding it himself, was Judas coward and traitor, deceiving a kind master. Just as the stars had their names and attributes, the men around me were classed. Jacob and Esau, Abraham and Isaac, had their prototypes at the sheep-shearings; and in our late harvests I fancied I saw Ruth gleaning among the sheaves, and Boaz telling the young men to treat her kindly: but our rustic damsels did not get such plentiful store as the fair Moabite, as they followed in the wake of Farmer Hurst's labourers, and the carts bearing home the corn from the fields bordering on the stony Moors.

The grand simple words of Scripture called up images familiar to me on all sides. The river in the desert was the rushing arrowy stream, one of the tributaries of the Tyne, which flowed down the Cheviots through the Moor. "The shadow of a great rock in a weary land;"—well, there was the great cairn which had sheltered me in many a tempest, and the green hill where the ancient Britons had shed so much blood that it was said to have fertilised the soil and made it ever verdant. The fatted calf—the rustic merry-making—the Prodigal's return—how I acted them all over to myself; as I lay dreamily watching the small black-faced sheep cropping the short sweet grass on the Moor, or the red short-horned cattle drinking deep

at the shady pool under the shady pool under the birch-trees, near our own door.

This small property which owned me for its master, partly moorland, was divided, or, as we say in Northumberland, "marched" by heath banks from the neighbouring uncultivated waste. Much larger properties, varying in extent, lay around us; and almost every description of scenery, from the rude Moors, scattered over with cairns and tumuli, to the softly falling verdant meadows and swiftly flowing streams wandering through them, or lost between steep banks crowned by waving ash and bending birch.

The scarlet-berried rowan-trees glowing above the red tiles of our house formed in autumn a combination as pretty and cheerful as any of which I had read, belonging to Southern vales, in my story-books; with my Aunt's bee-hives basking in sunshine on the slope, and the water glancing through the stream. That late season in the north seemed more like summer than the earlier months, which were often marred by deluges of rain, after the bitterly cold easterly winds of spring following our long snowy winters.

Here and there, through the trees, glimpses were caught of the distant Cheviots, and of a nearer range of hills, through which the river found its way to us. Though our soil was in parts thin and cold, with patches of purple heath on the hill-sides, and often bogs and morasses

vividly green below, parts of the low ground were fertile and well-wooded. The harvests were gathered in earlier in our district than in most others as near the northern border.

Perhaps the method of farming was old-fashioned. Men like our good neighbour, Farmer Hurst, abjured new ideas and revered the wisdom their of forefathers; but, after all, with such startling variations of soil and climate as we were favoured with on the borders of the stony moor, it was more than doubtful whether plans adopted in wealthy, fertile English counties would have answered better than the system of rotation of crops taught by experience of many stormy unfavourable seasons, as well as under propitious skies such as sometimes, but not frequently, lightened and brightened our labour. Certainly, I have never seen or tasted mellowier apples than grew on the espalier trees which bordered our garden walks. Our fruit did not ripen early, but it was excellent; and the abundant moisture of the earlier summer months fostered our crops, whilst the short but brilliant later season enabled us to bring the golden grain in and garner it safely and with joy. There was a kindly fellow-feeling too, in those days, between the larger and smaller proprietors, and between master and man, tenant and landholder, which is scarcely to be found now. We helped each other, and lent a hand willingly till all our

stores were gathered in and the long cold winter of the north fell upon us; when no man could work, and the cold snow and biting frost lay over vale and hill, and covered still more deeply the wide waste moorland.

CHAPTER II.

"No bird-song floated down the hill,
The tangled brook below was still;
No rustle from the birchen stem,
No ripple from the water's hem.

"The dusk of twilight round us grew,
We felt the falling of the dew;
Far from us, ere the day was done,
The wooded hills shut out the sun.

"But on the river's farther side
We saw the hill-tops glorified;
A tender glow, exceeding fair,
A dream of day without its glare."

J. G. WHITTIER.

MANY a trick was played upon me in my boyhood by the rough hinds at the Manor Farm. The worst of all—for which I have to thank the man I had named Judas—was one which nearly maimed and blinded me for life. There was a wall-eyed colt, bred on Farmer Hurst's land, as vicious as it was ugly, that lashed and kicked out at everyone who had occasion to go near him. The master sent him to be sold for what he would

fetch at a Fair in the neighbourhood, but no one would buy him at any price; so the man, whose craft and greed had made me liken him to the false apostle, was forced to bring back the brute, in a temper as surly as its own.

Now, as ill-luck would have it, I had gone, after work was over, to look at the booths; and our Judas caught sight of me just after meeting with an acquaintance who invited him to accompany him to a tavern, which hung out its lights temptingly to loiterers on the highway. The man stopped me, and swore that our master's orders were that if he saw me he was to tell me to take the colt home, if no one bought him, as I managed him better than anyone.

This unusual piece of flattery tickled my boyish vanity. I mounted bravely; but what with the lights of a carriage on the road, and the unsteady driving and riding of numerous parties returning from the Fair, the colt lost what little sense it had ever possessed, and fairly ran away with me. I had little power over him, for there was only the halter round his neck and the mane to hold on by, so I clung for the bare life as he whisked round dark corners of the well-known road home; dashing against farmers' gigs and traps, and assailed with blows and curses from foot-passengers, till, completely maddened, the cross-grained brute banged me up against a gate-post and unseated me, lashing out viciously as I lay helpless on the country

road; first kicking me on the leg, just below the knee, then within an inch of my right eye, and leaving me quite insensible.

Crash, crash! What was the terrible sound that roused me from the only swoon into which I have ever fallen? A mountain seemed to be rolling towards and hanging over me—flashing lights blinded my weak sight. In vain I tried to drag myself out of the way—to cry out; all I could do was to lift up my arm with a feeble moan. The horses, more humane and with a quicker instinct than their careless, probably sleepy, driver, swerved wildly, bringing the carriage up against the bank; the coachman woke himself up and swore fiercely. The carriage window was let down sharply—for, after all, it was only some gentlefolk coming back from a ball or dinner in the town—and an authoritative voice inquired what was amiss?

The footman swung himself down from the rumble, and condescendingly investigated the dark heap in the roadway, which had frightened the horses.

"Only a boy, my lord, a poor labouring boy," I heard him say, as he went nearer to the window. "A country lad asleep—most likely tipsy—going home from the horse-fair."

"Oh, don't leave the poor boy there!" I heard a voice say softly, inside the carriage; "open the door. Let me go out and see if he is hurt."

"No, no!" responded a sterner voice, and the next minute a man's tall shadow was thrown across the road.

The servant took one of the carriage-lamps and held it over me whilst his master examined, not unkindly, into my wounded condition.

The face bent over me scrutinisingly, though not young, was a very handsome one, with flexible lips, now strongly compressed, fair hair and complexion. I saw the at first indifferent, haughty, well-nigh disgusted expression change suddenly with a start, as I looked up at him and tried to speak, to a kindlier expression as regarded myself; but his manner of directing the servants was arrogant and impatient. The carriage was drawn up close, and I was lifted into it.

Faint as I was, I remember fearing lest the blood slowly oozing from the wound in my forehead should stain the lining of the vehicle, or still more the white dress of its occupant; but the young lady seemed to have no such fears as she drew my aching head on her knee and bathed my throbbing brows with some cooling essence which revived me. I felt her tears dropping on my hand, but not a word was spoken.

When we stopped at the turnpike, I was recognised by the man who kept it as Jessica Forbes's nephew, who worked at the Home Farm, belonging to the Lord of the Manor. Again I fancied that the strange gentleman's countenance changed,

and that his fair complexion grew paler; and as the light, which he desired might be brought out, flashed on my face, he looked at me searchingly: but he only said quietly, "I know the place!" and directed the coachman to drive to the turn in the road where our lane under the birch-trees led down to the cottage by the mill-stream.

While we waited the young lady had asked for some water; and dipping her handkerchief in it, had carefully wiped the blood from my temple, and kept the cool cambric pressed against it. Oh, what relief from agony! I thought that she was an angel, like the one that helped Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness, and I longed to see what angels were like; but I caught only a glimpse of her face, pale, and, as I have since learnt to call it, "most divinely fair"—less haughty than her father's, if, as I naturally supposed, her companion in the travelling-carriage stood in that relation towards her. Those soft hands were still busy with their labour of love and charity when we reached the corner of the road. At the turn of the lane, a couple of hundred yards from our door, the horses were pulled up sharply, and the gentleman let himself out immediately, desiring the coachman to wait for him.

I wondered that we had not driven farther. My wounds pained me excessively, and I chafed at the unnecessary delay. Aunt Jessica was no fine lady, needing, as he had said when he left

us, preparation for the sight of blood. I had seen her tend worse injuries than mine without flinching. I was wrong, however, for several minutes elapsed—it seemed an age to my boyish impatience—before she came running down the road. He followed her slowly, and she was quite white with terror and grief; so what he had said did not seem to have pacified her. Her face looked much younger and fairer than usual. I suppose her bonnet had fallen off, and I liked her much better without it. At all events, she seemed like a mother to the poor, sick, weary lad who was waiting for her so anxiously.

The young lady had bound the wet handkerchief round my head, and told me to keep it. I have it to this day. When my aunt washed it out the next morning, we saw that it was very fine, and delicately embroidered with French work, as she called it, round the edge. In one corner there was the initial M., encircled by a wreath of daisies. I am afraid the pretty dress must have borne marks of the close contact with the roughly-clad wounded lad whom the young lady had nursed so kindly; for the blood had poured fast while my head rested on her knee. The gentleman, when I was lifted from the carriage, had bidden her authoritatively not to think of alighting; and I heard him call out to the servants, after he had helped my aunt to carry me home: "Drive slowly. I will follow!"

He did not come inside our gate; where our kind neighbour, Mrs. Brand, was standing, waiting to see if she could be of assistance. She was always ready to help anyone who needed care and kindness, and often sat up with me at night when Aunt Jessica was weary and overwrought. In the intervals of sharp pain, which, for the first time in my life, kept me awake, I often wondered where the home of that fair gentle lady might be, and whether I should ever see her again.

CHAPTER III.

"From out the darkness where we trod,
We gazed upon the hills of God,
Whose light seemed not of moon or sun;
We spoke not, but our thought was one.

"We paused, as if from that bright shore
Beckoned our dear ones gone before,
And stilled our beating hearts to hear
The voices lost to mortal ear."

The Purer Faith.—J. G. WHITTIER.

My long illness must have been a sore trial to my Aunt, but she bore it patiently. Though we lived frugally, there was no parsimony in our wonted manner of existing; and now many unaccustomed luxuries were provided for me. One of my greatest indulgences was an entirely new set of books, which Aunt Jessica brought down from her own bedroom, when at last I began slowly to recover and was allowed to make use of my sight. While my eyes were weak she sat and read to me, sometimes out of the Bible or devotional books, at others from some book of poetry.

One afternoon, while we were thus occupied, my Aunt was suddenly called away. Our poor neighbour, Mrs. Brand, was in terrible grief, her husband having met with a severe accident. The volume happened to be laid down within my reach, and after waiting some time, I took it up and looked at it.

This particular book had a pretty, light-coloured binding, I discovered, under the neat linen cover, and on the title-page was written flowingly, but in a man's characters, very unlike the names inscribed in most of our books, "Jessie, from Bertie," with a date thirty years back. I put the volume down exactly in the place from which I had lifted it, before my Aunt's return; and some instinct in my boyish heart, which I should have found it difficult to explain, prevented my asking the grey-haired woman a single question.

I was inquisitive enough on all other subjects. Over and over again I inquired whether the gentleman and lady who brought me home in their carriage, had ever asked after me. The reply was always, "No," in the coldest possible tone; and when I wanted my Aunt to tell me how it happened that the gentleman knew that she lived at the Farm near the Mill-stream, under the birch-trees, and what it was he said to her at first which startled her so much, I got no reply at all. Most boys know what it is to have their curiosity baffled, and Jessica Forbes was a silent woman.

I have never known anyone who spoke less often; but when she did, and especially when she read aloud to me, her voice was low and pleasant. In her girlhood she had been well instructed, and she had afterwards had much practice in reading to her invalid mistress. There are verses in the Scriptures and among our best poets, which always bring back to me when I meet with them her voice and manner.

Another question which I longed to ask her was about the sun-bonnet, which of late she had not worn indoors constantly. When she was stiff and stern in my childhood, on first taking charge of me, I had often fancied that her severe-looking head-covering had something to do with her temper. Now she often sat by my side without it; looking more as she had done when she ran out, bare-headed, to receive me, with her shadowy light hair, silvered by time, the very glory of age, shining in the lamplight. The soft muslin cap, almost like a widow's, did not disfigure her; and, like her simple cuffs and frills, or plain broad hem at the neck and throat, was always daintily neat. But when I ventured to make a remark on the change, I was met with silent inattention.

"The boy is father to the man," I heard my Aunt Jessica say one night; when, thinking I was asleep, she laid down the book from which she had been reading, and bent over to kiss me before retiring for the night — her bonnie bairn, as she

sometimes called me, when she was in a good humour. "God grant it may be so, for a more leal, true-hearted lad 'never breathed. Ye'll never work sorrow for the lassie that loves ye."

The unwonted praise breathed gently over me touched me to the heart; for Aunt Jessica was not a woman who thought her own geese swans. On the contrary she was a hard mistress, hardest of all to herself, but very severe regarding my boyish faults. I was weakened by illness now, and the tears forced themselves under my closed eyelids; but my Aunt had turned away and did not notice them. No matter! I kept her words treasured in the innermost recesses of my heart, and tried to deserve the warmest commendation she had ever bestowed upon me.

I got well at last, but I did not return to work on the Home Farm. My strength was not great and I was growing fast, tall and slender, almost a man in appearance, but still a boy at heart, and almost as grave and reserved as Aunt Jessica. I left off associating with the farm labourers, and worked in our own fields and garden, or sat in the ingle-nook reading in the winter evenings. In summer, when the day's labour was over, I often took my way far up into the neighbouring hills.

The old Church across the Moor, where we worshipped on Sundays, was said originally to have been built by workmen brought from Rome

by St. Wilfrid. Legends of St. Cuthbert and the holy men at Lindisfarne, of St. Aidan and St. Columba, and the Irish saints from Iona, who christianised our wild north land, were familiar household words; and yet more identified with the grey stones of mouldering priories and monuments of antiquity scattered over the moors and in the narrow streets of our picturesque town. My Aunt humoured my love of nature and of the relics of the past, and often encouraged me in search after them. I should never be younger—never be a boy again, she often said. It was well to lay to heart, while faith and hope were fresh, what had been done for us by the God-fearing men of old. She was afraid there were few such pious toilers and workers in the vineyard now.

I perceived, with satisfaction, that my father's painstaking, strong-minded sister placed more confidence in me as I grew older. She consulted me seriously respecting the use she should make of a sum of money which, she said, she had laid by in a napkin for a rainy day. Her health, she confessed—I had seen no sign of it—was failing, and she wished to provide in the best manner she could for the time—perhaps not far distant—when I should be alone, and have to make my own way in the world. After my grief at this suggestion, which, however, I could not credit, subsided, we took counsel together; and bought with Aunt Jessica's bright gold pieces—not the Potter's Field

—but a portion of land which lay at the back of our premises, dividing our land from the piece of the moor which we possessed and had cultivated. Most of our neighbours had done the same with their share of the waste.

When the man I used to call Matthew, our collector of rates and taxes, married, and went into another county, Mr. Hurst asked me to help him with his farming accounts. I had plenty of employment now, and I was respected among my own people. Our labours prospered, and after a time we were able to add field to field in the singular number, and the work under our hands was blessed. I think we knew—I am sure my Aunt did, and she had tried to teach me—to whom we owed the bright sunshine and good crops; the plentiful showers and dews which watered our often arid soil and ripened our corn and vetches. Night and morning our prayer went up with our heartfelt thanksgiving to the good God who gives us rain and fruitful seasons, and who suffered us to lie down in pleasant pastures, beside the moorland stream.

My Aunt, to all appearance, was still hale and hearty, and worked with a will in our garden; but sometimes she complained in the evening of a pain in her side, or would stop her spade-strokes suddenly and stand aside with her hand on her heart, letting me take her place. I wanted her to keep quiet, but she said she was never better than

when in the open air; and, indeed, when wild weather, such as we often had so near the Moors, kept us indoors, she would sometimes moan as she sat by the fire-side, complaining that the air inside a house choked her. She could not draw her breath. An out-of-door life, to which she had always been used, suited her the best. Nowhere in the district were there such flowers, fruit, and vegetable as ours: and hitherto most of the garden-work had been done by Aunt Jessica and myself. We were not rich enough, nor was it the custom of those parts to hire many labourers. Aunt Jessica's honey was the best in the market. Our garden was the pride of our hearts. We had put our shoulders to the wheel, and made it turn briskly and pleasantly.

One night, after I had been asleep some hours I woke suddenly, fancying that I heard a voice calling me, and a tapping against the wall which divided my Aunt's chamber from mine. It may seem strange in our homely way of life, but I had never been in the habit of going into her bedroom, Except on that one occasion when she ran out bare-headed to receive me and subsequently while nursing me through my illness, I had never seen her without that formidable head-gear, always made after the same pattern — the old-fashioned sun-bonnet. Even now I knocked at the door, and waited till she said faintly:

“Come in, my boy.”

It was a very hot summer night, and the window under the projecting eaves was set wide open. The scent of the flowers of the white jessamine which clustered like a bower on that side of the old house, filled the air, and in an old china cup, set in the middle of a table covered with a cloth, was a bunch of roses. The black bonnet set on a stand on the drawers, solved a problem which had troubled my boyhood, when I used to wonder whether Aunt Jessica slept in it.

There was a light burning in the room. An open Bible lay on the pillow, but my Aunt was not reading. Her eyes were fixed with a very weary, wistful expression on the birch-trees, swaying in the night wind opposite to the open casement. Behind them the moon glinted at intervals. Sometimes her rays were obscured, at others they slanted into the room. Always, whichever way the boughs waved, a bright light fell down into the stream. Beyond, in the far distance, rose the faint undulations of the Cheviot Hills. A great grey boulder, under which I had often found shelter in bad weather, cast a distinct shadow across the moonlit moors.

I took it all in at a glance, and I have never since forgotten one feature of that sad scene. When I first came into the room, and saw my Aunt's eyes fixed, with that anxious look in them, on the open window—a sort of far-off, dreamy, longing gaze, not devoid of fear—I thought that

something outside—an owl or a bat, possibly—had frightened her; and I was going to close the casement; but she motioned to me to leave it open. Then I looked at her again, and in a moment, without a word being spoken, I knew that she was dying.

When that great dread fell upon me, I thought my heart was breaking. I went up to the bedside and knelt down, sobbing like a child. My Aunt laid her hand upon my head, and said gently:

“The Lord that made heaven and earth, seed-time and harvest, prosper thee, Harry!” Then she added, in a yet sweeter, mellower tone, using the words of Jacob: “The Angel that redeemed me from all evil, bless the lad!”

As the stern fact came home to me that death was in the air of the chamber, that the very next time the cuckoo flew out of its walnut-wood case and told the hour, in that sweet, bell-like, cooing tone I had heard for so many quiet years, from over the door of Aunt Jessica's room, I might be alone—alone in the world—alone with my dead—the very foundations of the earth seemed to be giving way. The line of the hills wavered in the moonlight before my dazzled eyes, the light foliage of the birches quivered confusedly, the sweet scent of the jessamine made my senses reel. Kind to the last, my aunt saw my condition, and held to my forehead the handkerchief with which she had bathed her own before summoning

me. The smell of the essence brought back to my memory the soft touch of the young lady in the carriage; and in a long rush of feelings that swept through my boyish heart, obliterating that momentary impression, all the love and care of the relation from whom I was about to part rose up before me. Had I taxed her strength too severely?

With the penitence which those who have loved best, and served most patiently, must feel at the deathbed of one beloved—how much more a wild, untutored country lad—I implored forgiveness for all my errors; and I received it fully. I had never, my aunt said, since my childhood, when she came to take charge of me, sinned wilfully; but, on the contrary, I had honoured and obeyed her like a parent, and as a mother she grieved to leave me. But she had known for a long time that her hold on life was much less firm than it had been, and now we must part. It was of no use sending for medical aid, as I wished to do. No doctor—no remedies could avail, since her hour was come; and she wished me to pass it with her. In the morning, if she lived as long, I should have my own way; “and perhaps,” she added faintly smiling, “it may not be yet awhile.”

“Wait a bit, my boy; I have one more story to tell you, and ye aye loved stories. I have kept the best for the last.”

CHAPTER IV.

“‘So,’ prayed we, ‘when our feet draw near,
The river dark with mortal fear,
And the night cometh chill with dew,
Oh, Father, let Thy light break through!

“‘So let the hills of doubt divide,
So bridge with faith the sunless tide,
So let the eyes that fail on earth
On Thy Eternal Hills look forth,
And in Thy beckoning angels know
The dear ones whom we loved below.’”

“YOUR grandfather, Harry, as you know, owned a farm, of which we have redeemed a portion, on the border of the Moors; but he came from the other side of the Cheviots. My lad, you have good blood in your veins—good Scottish blood, which has come down to you in a straight course from men who fought with Bruce and Wallace—aye, and I’ll warrant ye not to discredit it. The fields we bought with my dear mistress’s legacy and my savings, belonged to your forefathers; honest men, in whose footsteps I trust you will walk humbly before your God.”

A bright glow mounted to the high cheek-bones,

which of late had become more prominent. I noticed for the first time, with a keen pang of self-reproach, how much the flesh had fallen away from them. I had never thought much about our Scottish ancestry, though I knew that we came from over the Border, and that Aunt Jessica was proud of our respectable lineage. In my neglected childhood no one spoke to me about it, and I knew none of my kinsfolk. Now, in this solemn hour, it came upon me with a fresh force; I felt almost as if I was re-baptised, though it was my surname that acquired greater importance; and I resolved to hold the good old name of Forbes in as much honour as became a Christian man. I did not speak, however, and my aunt went on:

"I was your grandfather's youngest daughter, Harry—the only one who survived him. There was a number of years between me and your father, who was a grave, care-encumbered man of somewhat sour aspect, much like what I am now, when I came home from school, a bonnie bit lassie. Aye, ye may look, my lad, but I *was* bonnie then—bonnier than yourself, and that's saying a good deal!"

She laid her hand fondly on my head, and stroked my hair while she stopped to take breath. I did not doubt her word. To me she was very beautiful then, with that fitful blush on her cheek, rising up like a girl's quick colour at the sound of her own praise.

"Favour is deceitful and beauty is vain!" she said, gravely. "We just come up like flowers, my boy, and are cut down; but while the bloom lasts, it makes, or seems to make, a deal of difference. If I had not been bonnie, which is why I name it, I should never have attracted the man's gaze who robbed me of my happiness on this earth. Don't fire up, lad; I did not lose more than my peace of mind, or I reckon this tale would go to the grave with me. I'd not harm 'your innocent years with it. There was no harm done more than a few tears shed, and a life that might have been useful and happy spoilt ere it was well begun. That was all: only, my boy, remember—words are light things, lightly said and lightly forgotten, yet never a one left unrecorded. Mayhap if men thought how, through this life, soft sayings and slight caresses dwell in a girl's memory, and fetter her actions till love's season is past for ever, they'd be more chary of them. But I don't know. The story is a very old one, and has been told a thousand times, and yet I never knew one of you that heeded it."

She smiled a sweet, sad smile; and as I kissed her, I felt that her lips trembled.

"Let's get it over," she said, more in her usual manner. "This talking about the past is almost too much for me, and I'm none too strong; but I must not leave it unsaid. Now, listen, Harry! Every word I speak is as true as gospel, and I want

you to take it from my dying lips as I speak it, and to lay it to heart. I used to sit yonder under the birken trees, as grandfather called them, and a gentleman—there's no need to name him—came past the palings daily. I ought to have gone indoors, but—I'm telling the truth, as I must tell it soon—I did not move; nor did I stop the Scotch ballads I used to sing, or lilt, as grandmother aye called it, though I saw the stranger stop to look and listen, and loiter on his way. I did not go to seek him, as a bolder lassie might have done, and met a worse fate half-way; but I sat still and waited for the tempter. Be sure, if you do sit still, he will come to you!

“I can't tell how long this went on, but at last it drew to an end. My lover—for he was one before he ever spoke to me—found his way past the palings; and yet he was so plausible, so kind-spoken, that no one suspected him of evil—I least of all; but I never asked myself what good a gentleman of his station could bring me, a poor farmer's daughter, by his notice and flattery. I suppose we were too proud, and scarcely knew how much the wealthy English aristocracy reckoned us to be beneath them; and then he treated us all with such respect.”

“Did he give you a book?” I said, eagerly. “Was his name Bertie? There's one that, I think, has yours and his inside the cover. I never heard

anyone call you Jessie, but it is a great deal prettier than Jessica."

"Hush!" said the dying woman, while again the bright blush mantled in her cheeks. "I've not heard that name for thirty years, Harry—save once," she added, with her habitual strong love of truth; "and there's no need to speak of that one time. It has naught to do with my story. Never mind the name just yet awhile. It won't alter facts, and I'd as lief not speak it. The gentleman—for with all his faults he *was* a gentleman—went on coming to the house on one pretext or another, and I was the only person who guessed what he came for. Should I have forbidden him, or told my brothers? I don't know! Well, that's neither here nor there. I did not ask him to come, neither did I bid him go. We women all love flattery, and find it sweet to be courted. As I said from the first, I was a bit foolish lassie.

"So I went on weaving my garlands and singing my love-songs, till I got the thread into a tangle, and failed to fasten the stalks; and my voice trembled so that I could not take the high notes in the lilt my poor dead mother had taught me. Once I broke down—more shame for me!—in church, because *he* looked at me from the Manor pew; and I forgot whose praises I was singing and everything on earth and in heaven but the bright glance beaming upon me. Then I knew that I was far wrong; and that very evening—the

Sabbath—in the gloaming, by the brook-side, he told me that he loved me, and wanted me to fly with him—to go to the land of my ancestors, of which I sang so sweetly, where he had moors and a shooting-lodge, in which he would care for me tenderly; but, Harry, he never asked me to be his wife!

“I don’t know what I had expected: it was not that. I had not dreamed of anything beyond the foolish pleasure I took in his praises. But when he spoke out plainly, the spell was broken. I fled from the tempter then. I told him that I hated him, but it was not true. I loved him well and dearly. Still, I left him and all my friends at home, and the seat under the birch-trees; and I went to live with my cousin, who had often asked me to come and take care of her, promising my parents in their life-time that she would provide for me. It was the best thing I could do; but I never forgot him, and I never married. Many a year I mourned sorely for my lover as if he were dead, and dead he was to me. He wrote letters, but I sent them back without reading them, and I never returned to this part of the country till I heard that he was living abroad. There were worse tales told of him than anything I have said. He was the cause of evil far greater than any his light love inflicted on me. Nay, I thank him for breaking my own stubborn will, as he well-nigh did my heart, and bringing me nearer to God.

“Nearer, my God, to Thee,—Nearer to Thee,
E'en though it be a cross—That raiseth me;
So by my woes to be
Nearer, my God, to Thee.”

Murmuring broken portions of one of our Sunday hymns, my aunt lay back and closed her eyes; then she roused herself again:

“Look on my bookshelves over the drawers, Harry—the lower row, not the poetry. You may have all the songs and verses, but don't waste too much time over them. Give me the volume in the dark purple binding, at the far end. It might do him good. He has led a wild life, and formed ties which were better broken; but his heart was never a hard one. Perhaps what he told me was true, that but for fearing to displease his grandfather, he would have married me—I was so bonnie and winsome. At all events he might think so at the moment, but it did not last. He has loved other women, more, perhaps, than he loved me, and wronged them more deeply. But take the book, with Jessica Forbes's best wishes. You'll find the name inside. Take it to him, my boy, at the Manor House, if ever he comes there. And now leave me for awhile alone.”

The end was not far off. In spite of my Aunt's conviction that aid was unavailing, I had sent for the good doctor who attended Farmer Hurst when he had the gout; but he was not in time to see her living, and he said he could have

done nothing. In the early summer dawn that laboured breathing became more tranquil. At first I thought that it was sleep, but the hush in the quiet room, to which I had crept back, was deeper than what is caused by slumber.

Enough! I cannot dwell upon that solemn season, set apart by his Creator to draw the mortal nearer to immortality! It came and went for me, as it has done for others, full of sorrow, yet leaving behind it a deep, never-ending regret, as though those few sad days were better than any that could follow them.

I can see the white, stony moorland-road, blistering in sunshine, along which my kind motherly Aunt was borne by loving hands and willing arms to her last resting-place—the churchyard belonging to the ancient fane where, Sunday after Sunday, we had knelt together. The low square tower and crumbling ruins of hoar antiquity overlook her quiet grave; where, according to her own wish, only her initials have been engraved at the foot of a red sandstone cross. As we recrossed the Moor, I looked up at the dark grey boulder which had cast its sharp shadow in the moonlight over the waste when she lay dying, as into the face of a rough but compassionate friend. It was, as in my boyhood, “the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.”

How I got through that long day I scarcely recollect. I was almost a man now, and I had to

perform hospitable duties. My neighbour, Farmer Hurst, Dr. Grey, and one or two others, who respected my aunt, had attended the funeral. The men with whom, as a boy, I had worked, had asked leave to bear the coffin. At last it was all over—the first deep gloom of the ceremony and of our return home —yet more dismal if possible; the rural repast, during which men gradually resumed their customary speech and manner, my grave face making them stop short when the conversation verged upon cheerfulness. My friends did not remain with me long; and then I was left, for the first time in my young life, alone.

I was my Aunt's chief mourner, heir and executor. All that she possessed was left to me—the land she had bought in accordance with my wish, her furniture, books, and some ready money. Her clothes she had requested me to give to our neighbour, now the Widow Brand; who, since her husband's death and the diminution of my Aunt's strength, had assisted in our domestic labours. She now willingly undertook to perform such womanly services as I required for a fixed remuneration. The money I laid out in the purchase of two large fields, which I had long desired to possess; and for which I knew that Aunt Jessica had hoarded every penny she could save. One was the meadow through which, after it left the shadow of the birch-trees, the stream flowed; the other on the opposite side of the road leading to the moors.

As yet I had felt no pleasure in the society of the women of my own class in life, excepting in the companionship of my dear old aunt. I believe Mr. Hurst would have been glad if his pretty little grand-daughter and I had taken a fancy to each other, but neither of us showed the slightest inclination that way at present. I liked Susan well enough, but I could not have borne to see her take Aunt Jessica's place by my fireside.

I had not, you may be sure, forgotten my Aunt's charge about the book which I was to give to her former lover. I looked at the title-page on the day after the one when she was laid in the earth, and then I put it back on the shelf. The name she had written in it was Herbert—the Bertie of the songbook—Herbert Ducie, Baron Maskelyne.

There was little likelihood of his getting that death-gift at present, though he was now our Lord of the Manor. Still, as in his youth, a lover of pleasure, our gay Baron had not, to the best of my belief, set his foot on the soil which belonged to him save once; and then I was ill in bed and never caught sight of him. He must have been on a visit to his uncle, the old Squire, whose property he inherited, when his roving eye lighted upon the Border flower growing up in beauty under the birch-trees.

Lord Maskelyne, as he told my aunt, had estates in Scotland; and he found more attractions on the Moors in the grouse season, or on the

Continent at all times, than in the old North-country English Manor House. No wonder he so seldom visited it. There were tales told of him in the country-side to which I had no inclination to listen; but I feared the book of piety which she had chosen for him would have little effect upon one whom I had reason to regard very unfavourably.

I took the volume with me on my return from church, and my first visit to her grave, and I read it from end to end without altering my impression. It was from the pen of one of our old Scottish divines, full of earnest piety, loving zeal, and stirring rugged eloquence; but these stern truths would not touch him. Under the great rock of the moor, with heaven above my head, and God's book of nature open before me, those strong words reached my untried heart; but for the world in which *he* lived those homely phrases were unsuited.

Not that I knew anything about the world—that world which was only a name! I applied it vaguely to the life that went on in cities, among men of trade, seamen, soldiers, courtiers—men of whom I read in books. All that I knew for certain about it was that Lord Maskelyne was a man of the world—that world beyond the Moors.

At present his lordship was travelling in the East. There was no chance of his coming to this part of the country. I folded up the book, directing it to be left at the Manor House, in case any

accident prevented my delivering it there myself, as I fully intended, and then I put it back on the shelf.

Like most of the young men of my day, I had my period of doubt and dissatisfaction, when even the starry heaven I had loved from childhood, hanging above the Moors, was clouded; but the narrow spirit of scepticism could not thrive in the clear air of the hills. I shook myself free from the taint, as the natives of our healthy district rallied from the fevers under which, in the low marshy districts, men lay down and died.

When it was over, I felt as if I too had gone through some dire disease, from which it was wonderful that I had escaped so well. The best part of the attack was, that I felt sure I could never have it again. I had gone to the root of the matter, and I knew that the foundations of the faith I had held from childhood, though for a moment the structure seemed inclined to totter, were sound and would never fail me.

Before this trial I had extended my studies. It was not from Aunt Jessica's books, as I studied them side by side with nature, that doubts assailed me. But there were debating clubs and free libraries in the neighbouring town, where the well-informed Rector regarded me with interest and considered me a rising man. I learnt no harm from him certainly, and in general the books were well chosen; but, in one way or other, I came across opinions,

written and spoken, which for a time unsettled me. I do not think they did me harm in the end; but I read no more, and resolved to avoid hearing them.

It was a revolutionary era—no matter exactly which of the transition stages—when men's thoughts seethe and boil, and good is brought about through much evil. There were bitter thoughts in my own heart against the aristocracy after my Aunt's death; but I worked them off like scepticism, and returned to my early healthy reverence for God and man. The world was not all evil because human institutions grew rotten, and needed renovation; nor were the orders of the great scale of social existence to be disregarded, because some of what should have been its props gave way. In the spinney some of the young saplings were worthless; and the older ones, ivy-embraced, picturesque as they were, became worthless, and had to be cleared away. There are plenty of good men and true among the nobles of England, just as there are plenty of splendid oaks in her forests and woodlands, and honest labourers tilling her soil.

Our grave North-country folk shook their heads, and said that it was as well his lordship kept away. Such households set a bad example and did mischief. My Aunt was no gossip, and respected my tender years too much to allow of further revelations during my boyhood. Now that I was a man I knew what had been said, truly or falsely, of our Lord of the Manor.

I am not going to say that you or Lord Maskelyne would have made money on such a farm as mine, bordering on the Moors; but I did, believe it or not, as you like. My simple mode of life and thrifty habits, derived from my Scottish ancestry, enabled me, like my Aunt, to save a little at a time, and the seasons were propitious. I was a working man myself, too, and I toiled early and late. I had tended cattle from my earliest boyhood, and understood my business practically; though theoretically I had much to learn. I bought sheep, and pastured them on the Moor; sitting up watching and nursing the weaklings of my flock on cold February nights. My lambs prospered, being better looked after than those which had only hirelings to care for them.

Mr. Hurst had taken a fancy to me, and returned the assistance I gave him, in making up his accounts, tenfold. In short, Fortune favoured me: as the fickle lady sometimes, but not always, smiles on those who strive hard to please her.

Another good bit of land was in the market, and the kindly old farmer lent me the money to purchase it. By slow degrees I worked off the debt, and once again I was free.

CHAPTER V.

"Oh to be in England
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England now!"

R. BROWNING.

I REACHED the mature age of five-and-twenty without falling in love—a complaint which our hill-folk do not catch easily, or cast off lightly. When we do take it, we may go to our work and be the same to unobservant eyes, but it stays by us, influencing every thought and action. This is how it happened to attack me.

I was crossing the Moors one evening, at the end of April, when a fog fell upon me. Such a one as is common in our district, and in which no stranger could have found his way. It was not easy, even for one who had tended sheep on those wild hills in all weathers; but I got along, slowly and surely, until I reached the bridle track

which turned off from the white stony road across the Moor in the direction of our hamlet. I knew that I was right so far, for I could hear the murmuring of the stream, one of the tributaries of the Tyne, over the pebbles, and I had to follow its course; but, suddenly, I came to a halt. Mingling with the moan of the rivulet there came to my ear a wild, weird wailing, like the crying of a child in trouble, or it might be of some wounded animal.

It was somewhat hazardous to quit the track, but the sound came from the side away from the water; and I felt unwilling to pass by, leaving any living creature in distress.

As I drew nearer, my doubt was solved, for a plaintive appeal for aid was clearly repeated three or four times; while still the low monotonous wailing continued uninterruptedly, piercing the thick curtain of the mist.

Some of the traditions of the Moors, familiar to my boyhood, which told of benighted travellers lured off the track by wailing voices, came back to my memory; but I did not hesitate. I knew that in the direction whence the voice came, one of the tall grey boulders which crop out of the turf at intervals raised its granite front, and I made for it at once. The elves were said to have a peculiar predilection for this rude monument, once the site of a sacrificial stone. It was called, indiscriminately, the Hag's or the Elf's Stone.

The mists curled upwards, lightening sufficiently for me to catch a glimpse of what I shall name Haggisthorn Peak. It was a sharp-pointed rock, in shape something like a tall woman, standing on the waste, with a high cap on her head, and at her feet a twisted May-tree. Most of these elevations are named from some fancied resemblance, and one of our wildest witch legends bore reference to the hag who was said to frequent this otherwise lonely needle of granite.

The voice which invited me on now, however, was sweet and womanly. I called out in my turn, telling the lost wanderer to continue to speak in order to guide me. I longed to add: "Stop that unearthly moaning," but I did not; and it went on, while the tones that summoned aid intelligibly grew firmer, as my footsteps, sounding nearer, denoted approaching succour.

When I got close to the rock, and could see its outline, I perceived two figures crouching at its base. No features could be distinguished, but both forms were clad in long feminine garments, which flapped, heavy with moisture, in the night wind. One of these faintly discerned shapes was half-recumbent, leaning against the other, which stood erect and now silent.

The feeble wail was still going on. Its utter helplessness exasperated me.

"Stop crying," I said, it might be somewhat churlishly; "I know every inch of the Moors, and

I can help you out of your difficulties. Where do you want me to take you?"

"Do not be angry with my poor sister," said the tall girl, under the thorn-tree (I knew by her voice that she was young). "She is tired and cold, and never strong, but she does not wish to give trouble. Blanche," she said tenderly, bending over the almost prostrate form, "God has sent an angel to guide us out of the wilderness. You must not cry any more, or perhaps this good spirit will desert us."

The frail creature, leaning partly against the stone pillar, partly against her sister, made no audible response, but the plaintive sobbing ceased immediately.

There was no time for hesitation; without another word I lifted her, half-dead as she seemed with terror and fatigue, now obediently silent, in my arms; and closely accompanied by the more actively-made, slender-limbed girl, whose garments brushed against me as if she were afraid to lose us, I made my way back to the path.

When I had regained the track, I felt that the first difficulty was surmounted; and I again inquired in which direction lay the home of the two forlorn young creatures, who, but for my arrival, must have spent the night under the Haggisthorn. The description of the course they had pursued was very confused; as it appeared that they were perfect strangers, and had arrived, only the day

before, at a cottage adjoining a farmhouse close to the Moor, where rooms were let, occasionally, to persons in quest of health, artists, or sportsmen.

The two girls, enchanted by the wild beauties around them, had wandered on, mistaken the track, and become completely bewildered by the approach of evening, and the quick darkness caused by the mist. They had crept to the base of the lonely Rock—the last object they could descry, and the only shelter within reach.

This account left me in great perplexity. The place indicated was at least five miles from the spot where we were now standing; and I was by no means sure that I could find my way to it, across the moor and the rivulet. It was a very much more difficult matter to do so, encumbered by my helpless burden, than to find my way home.

There was no interruption to my meditations as I turned the matter over in my mind. The girl lay with her head on my shoulder perfectly still, so light a weight that I felt it no fatigue to support her. Her stronger-minded, more able-bodied companion, having answered my questions to the best of her ability, remained absolutely silent; confident, so it seemed, in my power to aid.

Light as the poor thing felt in my arms, I knew that I could not carry her many miles over the Moor, where not a house or cottage of any description could be found to shelter her if my

strength broke down. The wind was changing in its course and blew from another quarter, bringing with it particles of cold rain. Very possibly the mist might clear off, but the blast would cut across the waste right in our faces, and chill these lightly-clad girls to the bone.

What was to be done?

Suddenly my long-silent companion spoke.

"Where do *you* live?" she said, simply, as if her own thoughts had been occupied with similar considerations to those I had been revolving. "If your home is nearer than Stonelands, cannot you take us *there*?"

Perhaps I ought to have told her that I had now no kind motherly aunt, no sister, to receive her, but I did not; her words sounded like a revelation, and I said only:

"Yes, of course; I can take you home."

"Then do so," she said, gravely; "Blanche is very delicate, and ought not to be out in this damp fog. I am stronger, but I am very tired; I could not walk much farther. By all means let us go to your house, as you cannot take us to ours. Another time we will welcome you."

She put out her hand with a frank, kindly impulse and clasped mine warmly. I could not help drawing the cold little fingers through my arm. Something in that light touch, in the tone of the accents, which in spite of my rural breeding I knew to be refined, the slightly foreign manner

of speaking, reminded me of the pale fair girl who had bound up my bleeding forehead with the handkerchief which I still kept among my treasures. It was not recognition, for many years had passed since then; but my heart beat as those slender fingers closed on mine, and I felt them resting confidently on my arm.

We were on the right track now, and, as we approached the verge of the Moor, the mist became less dense, and the clouds were higher. It rained very heavily all night; but, just then, there was an interval of clearer weather as we wended our way slowly homeward—first across the stony moorland, and then, sheltered by the trees in my own fields, to the homestead under the birches, by the brookside.

I could not help wondering what the home might be like to which the young lady, whose hand rested so tranquilly on my arm, was expecting me to take her. Most certainly her imagination could not have pictured the homely moorland cottage-farm in its fenced garden; but, though she looked round, as if startled, when I led her straight through the wicketgate from the field pathway, and between the neat thrift borders to the door, where I took out the key from its usual nook under the thatch, she uttered only an ejaculation of thankfulness.

By this time I confess I was very weary of the burden which had seemed to grow heavier

every moment; I almost fancied that I could have carried the tall, elastic form of the elder sister more easily. Without wasting my breath by speaking I took them both indoors, and along the passage to our usual living-room; striking a light as soon as I had set down my charge in my grandfather's old carved oak chair, and kindling the fire laid in the grate. The flames sparkled up immediately, catching the light resinous stems of the pines and fibres of heath. In a few moments the turf glowed, and the homely room was full of light and warmth.

The elder girl was supporting her sister, and unclasping the light cloak—fortunately waterproof—which had protected her in some degree from the rain. They were both very beautiful, but extremely unlike each other. The younger sister, soft and round and feminine in every look and gesture, with blue eyes as devoid of meaning as the limpid waters of a pond, but large and clear; the elder, womanly also, but with the quick intelligence and the protecting air of one who had been all her life accustomed to take thought and to act for herself and others; with a slightly worn look in her delicate face and tall, slender form, as if the sword had a little chafed the fine leather of the scabbard.

These observations were made at the first glance, for I did not stop more than a few moments in the room. After seeing my guests

housed and provided with light and warmth, I went at once out of the house and knocked up my neighbour, Widow Brand, who saw^d after my house when I was absent for any time, and performed for me such womanly work as was necessary: her daughter, who was slightly lame, attended to the dairy.

I told her of the chance which had made me find two young ladies homeless and helpless on the Moor, and begged her to come and help me to take care of them for the night. The poor are usually neighbourly, and the widow, since my Aunt's death, considered herself indebted to me for an occasional afternoon's help in digging her garden and potato ground. She followed me in a few minutes.

I did not alter any of the 'simple arrangements in my Aunt's room, which I requested my neighbour to prepare for the use of the two young ladies. Humble as her position had been as a woman of the middle class, Aunt Jessica's habits and tastes were not unrefined. I was not likely to improve upon what had suited her. She had devoted herself to an invalid lady nursing her and tending upon her, serving her in fact as a friend and trusted companion, and she had contracted customs not quite common in her own rougher mode of life. All her ways were neat and feminine, and her room was the picture of neatness. There was not a speck of dust on her workbox

and writing-desk and bookshelves, nor on the sun-bonnet which still stood on its stand on the old oak chest of drawers.

I felt more embarrassed than I had done on the Moor when I knocked at the door of the living-, or, as we called it in north-country fashion, keeping-room, and was told to enter. The two fair girls were sitting on either side of the hearth, dry and warm, and seemingly quite at home. The one who had cried so bitterly on the Moor was now quite calm and looking extremely pretty, but it was not her face that fixed my attention.

It is of no use to disguise the fact—indeed, I betrayed myself in the first paragraph of this chapter—I had lost my heart irretrievably. Hopelessly too, I thought; for the lady before me was not of my equality, though she smiled most kindly, and rose and came to meet me, intending, I believe, to shake hands; but I pretended not to notice her intention. In my own house—shall I call it hut?—no, that would be an exaggeration, for our moorland cottages were comfortable dwellings—I felt inclined to treat my visitors with more profound respect than I had done upon the waste.

I must say that the room, occupied as it was at present, looked very comfortable. The firelight glinted on the knobs of the old carved settle, and on the red gipsy-cloaks hung over the backs of two chairs to dry, making a sort of glow which lit up the darkened corners; but it was the bright-

ness of those two youthful faces that imparted a charm hitherto unknown to my rural abode.

I did not sit down, though I was kindly invited to partake of the refreshments neatly spread for the two weary ladies; but, after telling them that the room above was ready for them when they liked to retire, and that the woman who waited upon them would do all in her power to be of service, I withdrew. The youngest of the fair sisters thanked me enthusiastically. She seemed perfectly happy; enjoying like a child the warmth and comfort of my cottage hearth, and, apparently, forgetful of past discomfort. Yet I valued more the one word, the graceful gesture, the tearful, grateful glance of her less demonstrative companion. Now that the necessity for exertion was past they seemed to have changed characters.

Though I had not chosen to intrude upon my guests I felt in no humour to seek company in the kitchen. I went into the garden and walked up and down the cross walk, under the high filbert hedges, through which, as yet, the rain did not penetrate heavily, until I saw, by the darkening of the lower window and the brighter light above, that the two fair sisters had retired to take what rest they might hope to obtain under my humble roof.

I gave up my own room to the widow, and took my share of repose in the old arm-chair by the fireside; but the night was a very disturbed

one. All sorts of visions haunted my slumbers, which were broken and uneasy; and I woke and opened the window soon after daybreak, just as the birds began their matins in the garden. Being fairly roused, I made up fires in parlour and kitchen, filled the large kettle for Mrs. Brand's benefit, and brought in an ample supply of wood and turf, besides rifling the nests in the fowl-house.

It was still quite early when I came back to the house. I am not superstitious, but I own that my breath came short when looking over the garden-hedge I saw, just across the rows of gooseberry and currant bushes that bordered the centre walk, my Aunt Jessica's black bonnet. There was no mistaking it! Often and often she had called out to me, and scolded me for laziness, on Sunday mornings, from that very spot.

A more prolonged glance first strengthened, then dispelled, the illusion. It was true the figure in my garden was about the same height as my Aunt, and bore on its arm the very basket of seeds and tallies she used to carry, but the form was more youthful and agile. It remained for some minutes at nearly the same distance, stooping at measured intervals, and then gradually drew nearer.

Not a little curious at my visitor's occupation, all ghostly fancies having vanished, I went to meet her. Aunt Jessica's neat black bonnet, put on in

the way our peasant women wear their head-coverings in the sultry harvest-fields, was not at all unbecoming to that fair young face. I registered a rash vow on the instant that no other woman's hand should ever be privileged to touch my domestic treasures.

Doubtless the young lady thought I had a sister, whose apartment she had occupied during some temporary absence. It certainly did not strike her that she had shaded her pretty young features with a venerated relic of the departed.

Nevertheless, as she approached the cottage, the antiquated headgear was removed, and she blushed excessively; apologising to me for the liberty she had taken, after accosting me. The sun was so bright, she said, and she could not find her own or her sister's hat—they were hanging with the cloaks in my parlour, the feathers freshly curled up after the rain by the warmth of the fire. An irresistible fancy had seized her to rise early, and take a walk in the pretty garden beneath her window, before Blanche awoke; and to sow the flower-seeds, so neatly arranged with their tallies, in the basket on the drawers.

Among the relics, few in number, which I possessed, this basket was one. I feared that my Aunt had tired herself with stooping to sow some flower-seeds in the garden on the day before her death. The neatly written names on the sticks were the last characters her hand had traced. I

had cut the tallies for her myself, during an evening of leisure; and the token of her unfinished labours had remained ever since untouched.

I should have been very angry if Mrs. Brand had meddled with my Aunt's possessions, but here the case was different. In time the mignonette, candy-tuft, larkspurs, and lupins, would come up to remind me of past happiness. It might be a dangerous gratification, but no matter—the seed was sown—all I had to do was to water it, and shade the young, tender plants from the sun, and cherish them through the summer.

The young lady did all the talking. I could only look at her as she moved daintily along with her dress sweeping the pebbled walk. She had fastened it up in some manner while she sowed the seeds, but now she let it fall carelessly down. Her tall figure, full of womanly grace and dignity, filled my whole soul with admiration; her low, sweet voice riveted my attention.

I now learned, more fully than I had done the nights before, the nature of the circumstances which had caused her and her sister to be lost on the Moor. Blanche, she said, was always good and gentle, but her health was not strong. She never went into society, and it was such a treat to be quite at liberty in the country, on the wild Moor. They had come down from the neighbourhood of London, where the gardens were so prim, one just like another; and where Blanche

was never allowed to go beyond their own premises. They were orphans; but she had sometimes travelled with her guardian—Blanche had never accompanied her before, and was so delighted; she had all the good points of human nature with the naughtiness left out. When they got on the Moor she was wild with joy. They had wandered on and on, till they were completely lost.

While she was speaking, a strange vague sense took possession of me that I had heard those soft accents before, just as the touch of her hand on the Moor had awakened feelings I had experienced once only in my life.

"Have you," I said, trembling lest her answer should dispel this sweet consciousness, "ever, before last night, crossed the Moors?"

"I have not only crossed these Moors," she said, looking up into my face with a smile, "but I have seen this cottage. I remembered the birch-trees when I came out this morning and saw them waving over the brook. I believe you are—you were, I mean—the boy we picked up, so sadly wounded, by the road-side, and whom we brought back to this very house."

This time—we were walking side by side now—I ventured very respectfully to take hold of the white hand which had bound up my wounds. No knight of old romance could have touched those taper fingers more reverentially.

"I was—I am—Harry Forbes, the poor Moor-

land shepherd-boy you deigned to care for," I said. "Will you not tell me by what name I may continue, as I have ever done without knowing it, gratefully to pray for you?"

"My name is Marguerite Duval. My grandfather was a peasant-farmer in Normandy, of the same rank as yourself. But we have a kind guardian who has given us the advantages of good instruction. That is, you know, merely accidental."

Her words cheered me, though I felt convinced she had always moved in a higher circle than myself. Still I rejoiced that she was not born noble.

"Let us go indoors," she said; the same anxious expression, which I had seen on her face the night before, which made her look older, overshadowing it. "I see my sister at the window looking out for me. Poor Blanche is not accustomed to do much for herself, and I always assist her to dress. She is not strong, but she is a little angel. Everybody loves her."

Marguerite went without farther speech into the cottage; ascending the old oak staircase in the corner of the keeping-room, as if she had known it all her life. The next moment I heard girlish voices and laughter through the window of what I have ever since called the room of the French sisters.

While my visitors partook of the farmhouse

bread, fresh eggs, cream, and butter, set out neatly for them by Mrs. Brand in the parlour, I went across the road, and as far as Farmer Hurst's, to borrow the pony and side-saddle on which his pretty grand-daughter Susan always rode when she visited him.

I was at my cottage door by the time that simple morning meal was over, for I felt that this was a case in which it was my duty to speed the parting guest. It was, nevertheless, with a pang of regret that I saw the two fair-haired sisters come out, in their shady hats, and pass through the strip of garden ground under the birch-trees.

Marguerite did not speak, but she looked to the right and left as if recognising the objects around her, Blanche mounted the pony. Her sister and I walked by her side.

Our way lay right across the Moors, but there were no dangers to be encountered. Winding among the hills lay the white, snake-like twisting track, the granite of which it was composed sparkling in the sun-light, until it was merged in a wider, more frequented road, equally sparkling, and dry enough to be trodden by a lady in satin shoes.

In spite of Blanche's solicitations that she should take her share of riding the pony, Marguerite walked the whole way.

"I am strong," she said; "I like nothing better

than walking, especially on such a morning as this, and across the Moors."

Even Haggisthorn looked cheerful, with a few white blossoms gemming the old May-tree on the side least scathed by the wind. We all stopped to look at the Witch under her improved aspect. Marguerite sighed as she turned away. I would have given the world to know—why?

Blanche, on the contrary, was in high spirits. The wild long ride charmed her, and she talked fast. I saw that her intellect had lain fallow, like a child's, who, from ill-health, has been forbidden to learn; and I suspected that there was also some slight mental deficiency. Marguerite, as was not unnatural, grew each moment graver and sadder.

For myself, I agreed with Blanche in one of her childish remarks. I wished that the moorland road would go winding on and on for ever. I counted the miles; and, as we passed each well-known land-mark, I felt a fresh pang of regret. Such an accident would never, in all probability, happen again, as had made me, for nearly twenty-four hours, the protector of the two fair girls from whom I was about to be parted, probably for ever.

At the last stone wall, after diverging from the great road over the Moors by a shepherd's track, which cut off a considerable angle, I halted reluctantly.

"We must part here," I said. "Frolic can go no farther, and I must take him back to his

master; the path beyond this enclosure is private, and will take you to the back of Stonelands."

Blanche looked suddenly graver. "Oh, I am so sorry!" she said—"Come in and rest."

Marguerite had stooped to gather a little tuft of forget-me-not, a small, worthless blossom enough in itself, at the base of the wall.

"Must we part now?" she said, without repeating her sister's invitation. "Perhaps it is best. We will come again, and thank you for your hospitality."

She placed her hand in mine; and, by some chance, the flower she had gathered remained in my possession. I have it to this day.

CHAPER VI.

"When the old sweet silence of the country-side and the old sweet sound of waking birds, and the old sweet fall of summer showers, and the grace of a hedgerow bough, and the glow of the purple heather, and the note of the cuckoo and the cushat, and the freedom of waste and of woodland, are all things dead and remembered by no man— then the world, like the Eastern king whose touch turned all to gold, will perish miserably, with gold in its stiffened hands and gold in its withered lips, and gold everywhere— gold that the people can neither eat nor drink, gold that cares nothing for them but mocks them horribly—gold for which their fathers sold peace and liberty—gold that is one vast grave. The world is too like the Eastern king, and in its greed of gold it will barter its life away."— OUIDA.

BEFORE returning home I took the pony back to the farm, and went into the house to thank my neighbour for the loan. The woman who kept his house for him told me her master was sitting in the parlour; a very unusual thing for the active, hale old man to do at that hour of the day. The fog had chilled him, the house-keeper supposed. She did not think Mr. Hurst was well. He had

told her to light a fire, and he was looking over his books, a sure sign that he was poorly and out of sorts.

The old man was sitting, crumpled up in his chair, when I went into the room, with his farming accounts open before him, but not looking at them, crooning over the fire like an ailing woman.

"Hallo, Harry," he said, "you're just the person I was wishing to see. Not that you or anyone can help me! What do you think? Haven't I done my duty by the land, bad as it is, since I took to this farm? I don't believe I've had more out of it than I've put in—it's the ungratefulest soil in England.—Well, it seems my lord's not satisfied.—He wants to have new ways, and to make a new place of it altogether; and hang me if I care to stop and see it."

Mr. Hurst brushed away a fly that had settled on his eyelid; and then looked steadily away from me into the heap of burning wood and turf on the hearth.

"You are not thinking of leaving the old place, surely!" I said. "No man could have done his duty by the Home Farm better than you have done. I only wish his Lordship could say as much for his care of the Manor-House and estate!"

"True enough, Harry, my boy. He's been a bad man, and a hard landlord, for all his light, pleasant ways of talking, all his life; and he'll be so to the end. Neither man nor woman ever had

cause to thank him for his interference in their affairs. He has got some crotchet in his head now about machinery. We shall have the ricks burnt next winter if he brings steam ploughs and harrows to the Moors. Much good it will do! Anyhow, I've no mind to go to school again. Best make a clean sweep of it at once—new men and new measures. There's scripture warrant for it, that it's ill work mending old garments with new cloth."

Again the old man looked into the fire. He did not wish me to see the tears that filled his eyes as he spoke of leaving the farm; on which, as boy and man, he had worked for sixty years.

"Lord Maskelyne will think better of it," I said, soothingly; "never mind the books; I'll engage there's nothing wrong in the accounts. His own are not as well kept. Where is he now?"

"There's his letter. You can read it, lad. You're a better scholar than I am. It took me half the morning to make it out. It's the first time he ever took the trouble to write to me himself, and I don't care if it be the last."

A great repugnance came over me to the very touch of the great man's letter. I hated the sight of his meaningless characters—the same handwriting which I had seen in the title-page of my Aunt's volume of poetry. In general all communications between Lord Maskelyne and his tenants passed through the steward; a plain, straightforward man of business, who lived at a large town

at some distance across the Moors, and audited the accounts.

His Lordship's style was as involved as his writing, and I was even more impatient than my old neighbour. I hated circumlocutions, and flimsy attempts at civility, veiling a hard purpose. He had evidently made up his mind to convert the Home Farm into a sort of model establishment. In future, he said, he contemplated residing more on this part of his property, which he was convinced might be made much more profitable, and the experiments he meant to set on foot would amuse him. If Mr. Hurst objected to the use of the new machinery for agricultural purposes, and to the improved methods of rearing and feeding cattle, some fresh arrangement must be made; but he trusted the alterations he meant to introduce would not deprive him of the valuable assistance of his present tenant.

Veil it as he might, I was quite sure, after reading his Lordship's polite epistle, that he intended to rid himself of his Uncle's faithful old tenant; but I took care not to betray the impression I had received.

By my advice a guarded letter was written, deprecating the employment of machinery on this remote part of his Lordship's estates, but leaving him at liberty to introduce a new system of rearing and feeding stock, if he thought proper. Mr. Hurst did not profess to understand the new style of

farming, but he would do his best to further Lord Maskelyne's wishes, and to carry out his instructions.

"Ten to one, he will not take the trouble to make any change, unless you provoke him by opposition," I said, after the letter was written, greatly to the relief of my old friend's mind. "By the time he receives your answer he will be off to the Mediterranean or Norway, in his yacht; and he will have his head full of some new plan of amusement. I should just like to see him settling down contentedly at the old Manor-House, amusing himself and his fashionable friends, with the management of turnips and mangold-wurzel, and fattening pigs and bullocks at his Model Farm on the Northumbrian Moors."

Mr. Hurst laughed heartily. "Aye, aye, just let him try it! Down in South Tyne, on the fat land by the river, it might answer better; but depend upon it, experimental farming won't do here. Wilt stop and take your dinner, and smoke a pipe, Harry? I feel no end better now that letter is off my mind. Perhaps it may all blow over, like many another fancy of that scatterbrain. Oh Lord, how I wish we had the old Squire back again! But it's no use thinking of that when he has been buried this twenty year! 'Twas a bad day for us all when we followed him to the churchyard!"

I declined my neighbour's invitation and left him considerably comforted, but I was less well satisfied myself. I believed that Lord Maskelyne

had made up his mind to get rid of his old tenant and to place the Home-Farm in other hands.

Time passed on without bringing me into communication with Marguerite and her sister. Farmer Hurst's letter remained unanswered. It was as though we were both forgotten; but, while my neighbour rejoiced in the total silence, I was becoming day by day more discontented with my position. Depend upon it, such feelings as had gained possession of me are always taken advantage of by the evil one; and a temptation was at hand to try me.

Over and over again as I crossed the Moor, I looked at the old Thorn, now swept clear of blossoms by the May wind, and green with leaves; or down the track leading to Stonelands—but no female form appeared in either direction. The visit of thanks which had been promised remained unpaid.

After all it was scarcely probable that these young ladies, though they had been grateful for my hospitality, would again cross my threshold. What was I but a poor working farmer, not able even to keep a servant; and living on my own limited resources, with no pretension to more than respectability. Even if Marguerite and Mademoiselle Blanche—I seldom, even to myself, called her by her Christian name—wished to come and see me, their unknown friends and relatives would dissuade them from such an indiscretion.

I began to think Lord Maskelyne might be right in thinking that more might be done with the land under a new system; and to wish that I had been in the way of hearing something about new men and manners of farming. What prospect was there of making more than a bare livelihood on such a property as mine, in part only recently reclaimed from the waste; and which a few unfavourable seasons might, as my father had found by sad experience, return to well-nigh its pristine barrenness. Would any woman but Aunt Jessica be satisfied with such a lot, with little prospect of improvement and no relaxation from constant toil and anxiety?

I missed my good Aunt more than ever, and for the first time practically realised that it is not good for a man to be alone. In the long evenings I tried in vain to banish the thought that in this endless dull round of work, summer and winter, spring and autumn, with their monotonously recurring labours, would go on, till I went down, like her, to the grave, still leaving me a poor, hardworking, solitary unit, with no brighter hope than that I might just contrive to make both ends meet at the end of each tedious year, and avoid insolvency. Might it not be better to sell up all and go across the Atlantic, as Aunt Jessica told me one of her brothers had done, sooner than share the labours at home on the farm, which had been, then as now, unprofitable? She had only

heard from him once since they parted, and then he had been sorely affronted at her refusal to go out to him. He had married and lost his wife, and wanted her to keep house for him and take care of his children. Just at the same time word reached her that I was left an orphan and scantily provided for; and she, after weighing the matter in her mind, considered that her duty lay towards the boy that was left fatherless as well as motherless. She had also a great wish, now that her friend and mistress no longer needed her services, to see the old home again.

On her deathbed she had charged me to write to Uncle George, and say that she hoped he had borne no ill-will against her for her refusal, as not a line had reached her from him since that time. There had not as yet been any reply; but in my present state of dissatisfaction my heart turned towards my only living kinsman and his family.

If no better prospects than those at which I had been lately gazing opened upon me, I would write again, and propose to join him and my cousins, who must now be men of my own standing. I could let my land to advantage, for it bordered on larger properties, the owners of which would gladly annex my acres, or I might, though I scarcely liked to think of it, sell my patrimony. When I got to that pitch of desperation, I pulled myself up short, and went out into the quiet fields, like the Patriarch, to muse at eventide. There were

the glorious hills steeped in the dying sunset's glow—the rivulet flowing with a sweet song through the reedy banks and under the birch-trees—over the moors, on the opposite side, hung a crescent moon like a sickle; a star twinkled as usual above the great grey boulder. Before I went to bed I had abjured my erratic projects and resolved not to part with my birthright.

CHAPTER VII.

"The scarlet pimpernel peeps here and there,
Amid the ears the crimson poppies blush,
Still on the brook gleam water-lilies rare
And purple loose-strife and the flow'ring rush,
The blue campanula and chicory wild,
And yellow toad-flax variegate the plain;
And with a thankful heart and sense beguiled
We look upon the fields of ripening grain."

H. G. ADAMS.

I HAD been helping a neighbour to get in his crop of hay before a threatened change of weather, and came home, tired, after a long day's work, when I saw the postman with a letter in his hand, tapping at my door. The communications I held with the outer world were so unfrequent that the circumstance was a surprise; and the few letters I received often lay waiting for days at the shop in the village, till I happened to ask if any had arrived for me. I was still more astonished when I recognised the handwriting of Lord Maskelyne, instead of, as I half hoped and expected, a letter from my Uncle in the Colonies. The brief note was civilly, even courteously, worded, requesting

an interview with me at the Manor House, if possible, that very evening.

To the best of my recollection I had never seen our Lord of the Manor. He had only visited this part of his property once since my very earliest childhood, and that was when I was ill in bed after the kick of the the farmer's colt. I by no means wished to make his acquaintance now; but, in rural neighbourhoods like ours, there still lingers a respect for the feudal superior, which it is difficult to shake off, however little, as was the case in the present instance, he may deserve it.

Besides this consideration, I had never discharged the duty laid upon me by my Aunt. When Marguerite and her sister occupied my upper chamber, the only article I removed was the book directed in Jessica Forbes's clear, stiff characters, to Lord Maskelyne. I determined to deliver it into his own hands now, on this, the very first opportunity.

Close to the book, in the drawer where I had placed it, lay the embroidered handkerchief, with the daisy wreath in one corner, which I had kept since my boyhood. I knew from many an old legend, as well as from history, that our queenly Margaret of Anjou gave her knights a daisy for their crest. The lowliest field-flower was the emblem of England's haughtiest Queen. I did not touch the relic now, but merely glanced at it. I was not in the humour for soft thoughts.

The sky was dark with thunder-clouds as I approached our old deserted Manor-House. The first heavy drops fell through the leaves of the trees in the avenue as I walked beneath them. Never had I seen the mansion occupied except by the two old servants, the gardener and his wife, who had charge of the place, and kept it in order. Stephen Marter was brushing up the grass, which had just received its first mowing, as I passed over the bridge that spanned the moat.

"It will be a storm, master," he said briefly; "good thing you got your hay in last Saturday. They clouds have been working up to windward all the afternoon, and means mischief."

Scarcely had the words passed his lips when, crashing over our heads, splashing into the moat, broke the contents of the cloud. A vivid flash lit up the windows of the Manor-House, and turned blood-red the waters at our feet. The rain came down like a water-spout. The old man quickened his steps and carried his tools under shelter, whilst I walked steadily on to the front door, where the wide old-fashioned porch kept off the rain-drops.

As I stood waiting for admittance, I looked back across the moat—which I had never passed before—down the long avenue, now mirk as midnight, and then momentarily lighted up by vivid flashes. The trees were very old; and, even in their young, fresh mantle of summer's earliest green, the tokens of decay were very visible. Every

autumn one or more of those lordly elms crashed down, prostrated by the burden of years.

The house itself was ancient and neglected. Some hasty, totally inadequate attempts had been made to put it in order, but his Lordship's arrival was quite unexpected; not a soul about the place knew of his intention. A stone terrace, mossy and lichen-stained, lay in front of the windows; the urns at the angles of the steps were choked with weeds and parasitic ivy, which had overgrown the tender plants once cherished there. One of the large panes of the front window nearest to me was broken right across the middle; and a shower of mortar had fallen down below a once ornamental, but now dilapidated stack of chimneys, quite out of the perpendicular, which threatened soon to follow the example of the rubbish. The old servants had long been past their work, but no one had cared sufficiently about the place to think of superseding them. There had not been a whisper of new men and new measures with regard to the dwelling-house, where reformation was certainly wanted much more than at the Home Farm.

I was not kept waiting. A foreign-looking servant, who seemed to expect me and asked no questions, showed me at once to the library, where Lord Maskelyne was ready to receive me.

The room was, doubtless, very dark at all times, being low, and lined from floor to ceiling

with books. Four narrow windows looked out upon a parterre wholly unenlivened by flowers. The windows were all open, and the rain splashed loudly in the waters of the moat, which ran round the house, enclosing a small portion of utterly neglected garden-ground; capable of being rendered ornamental, but now a wilderness of weeds and flowers run to seed together.

Lord Maskelyne rose as I entered the library, and came forward to meet me with the affability of a county member on the eve of a strongly contested election. I believe he meant to shake hands, but I avoided noticing his intention. He was a tall, thin man of about fifty years of age, with a sharply pointed chin and a beard cut to correspond, long light moustachios which he habitually stroked while speaking, a fair faded complexion betokening delicacy of constitution, and, at the same time, a wiry frame, calculated to bear fatigue, and denoting muscular strength; his accent and manner of speaking decidedly foreign.

I was somewhat surprised at his expressing himself, with great volubility, as under considerable obligations to me; and for some time, I did not in the least understand his meaning.

It did not put me at all in a better humour when I found that his Lordship was thanking me for the kind services I had rendered to two young ladies, who, but for me, must have spent the night upon the Moors. Nothing, he said, could exceed

their gratitude except his own, which he should be happy to prove to me by any means in his power—nay, he hoped that an opportunity of serving me *had* already arisen.

At this point I managed, with difficulty, to get in a word. Anything I had done for the ladies in question, I said, was amply rewarded at the time by their kind expressions of gratitude. I would rather hear no more about so slight a matter. I should have taken just as much care of any cottage girls benighted on the waste.

“No doubt—no doubt,” interrupted his Lordship. “Still, in the present case, the obligation was infinitely greater, since Mademoiselle Blanche was extremely delicate, and might have suffered seriously.”

Then he rambled on—I cannot recall his exact words—to the effect that the weight of obligation was immense. Still he thought, he hoped, that a means might be found of cancelling part of the debt. Mademoiselle Marguerite also felt the obligation deeply, and had paved the way for him. She was a young lady possessed of very acute powers of observation, improved by culture, and she had reported most favourably concerning me; declaring that she was certain I should do credit to her recommendation.

I did not think Lord Maskelyne's manner half so objectionable when he reached this point of his

harangue, and I waited with considerable curiosity to hear what was to follow.

"I have made up my mind," he said gravely, after a pause, "to remove old Hurst from the Manor Farm. I am sorry to do this. Old trees cast deep roots—and he may not like it, but he must go. Most of my Uncle the old Squire's retainers are absolutely superannuated. I mean to make a clean sweep of the present establishment, and let in new blood into its human supports; just as, by felling worthless timber, light and air are admitted, and good trees are able to flourish. Just look, my dear sir, at this house! You could not pass through the gates without noticing the mouldy state of decomposition which prevails throughout the premises. I am a man of the new era—an ultra-Liberal, as you all know, in politics. Conceive my being forced to dwell in this rat-hole—this grave of effete Toryism and antiquated prejudices! It is quite out of the question. And yet one grows tired of wandering; one desires for a few months—or, shall we say weeks?—to cultivate the domestic virtues—the love of home, and all that kind of thing. To do this I must have cheerful surroundings. I must remodel my establishment, my farms, my habitation. Is it easy to do this, and cause no pain to the estimable individuals who have grown old, vegetated like those abominable weeds in the parterre, during my absence? I see this shocks your local pre-

judices; though you are, I congratulate you upon it, an advanced Liberal. But there is no possibility of retrograding; we must press forward, even at the risk of demolishing some respectable institutions."

A flash of forked lightning ran in zigzags like flaming ribands across the storm-clouds, and lit up the dark room, followed instantaneously by a rattling peal of thunder, which shook the old house to its foundations. Lord Maskelyne listened dreamily, while, probably from the reverberation, more of the stones and mortar of the dilapidated chimney fell noisily on the terrace. Truly, among other time-worn constructions the ancient Manor House seemed likely to crumble away!

"I regard Hurst as an institution," Lord Maskelyne continued, without noticing the crash. "A most respectable, and, in his day, a most useful institution; but his sun has set. Fortunately it was a whim of my Uncle's, the old Squire, to grant no leases. I do not know his motive, as he hated changes; but the clamour in my ears to grant them, on my first accession to this property, subsided after I directed Hutchinson to read aloud the words from my letter, in which, after expressing my affection and respect for Mr. Maskelyne's memory, I announced my determination to alter none of the existing arrangements. Since that was the case no one troubled themselves much about the matter. This leaves me free to act as

I please; and, next year, I mean to take the Home Farm into my own hands. You smile: or, at least, I choose to say that you manifest outwardly what I know to be your inward conviction—that I shall make a hash of it! Good—very possibly, true—but how will it work if I have a man of business habits and acute intellect, fully acquainted with all the new methods of farming, to work under me? Mind, I say a working man, but one who has studied the modern system. How long do you think it would take to learn it?”

“That must depend upon circumstances,” I answered; “it takes a lifetime to study soil and climate, and the management of stock; and after all, the most experienced farmers are constantly baffled. I am completely one of the old style, of which I consider Mr. Hurst a most excellent specimen.”

“Not a bit of it,” said his Lordship, quickly. “You are a man of prompt observation—fond of scientific research. I have heard much about you and the books you read, and I know that your opinion is respected. A little behindhand, perhaps, in theory and practice, according to modern fashion, but that may be amended. What say you to studying the new mode of farming practised upon my Scotch estates—at my expense, of course—with a view to succeeding Mr. Hurst at the Home Farm? I will keep it open for you.”

I thanked his Lordship, stiffly and ungraciously

I am sure; positively declining the offer. Mr. Hurst was my friend, and I could not undertake a course of study with the view of supplanting him. Besides this, I preferred to be my own master.

"As you please," said his Lordship, languidly and wearily. "It makes not the shadow of a difference with regard to Hurst; but, of course, you are the best judge of what suits yourself. Mademoiselle Marguerite pointed out your merits; and mentioned the titles of the books on your table, as marks of a superior character. I have great respect for her judgment, and she considers herself deeply indebted to you. It would have given me pleasure to serve you."

As he went on speaking his manner became more courteous; and, when his eyes met mine, it suddenly occurred to me, through some mysterious association of ideas—his image had not made the same impression, or stayed by me like hers—that he was the guardian with whom Marguerite had crossed the Moors, the tall fair gentleman who lifted me inside the carriage.

"Mademoiselle Marguerite does me too much honour," I said. "I believe I am much more indebted to her and to you for an act of kindness during my boyhood, when you found me on the Moor, senseless and bleeding from the kick of a vicious colt, and took me home in your carriage to the Farm under the birches."

Lord Maskelyne's countenance changed. He did not look up or speak. I went on:

"My nearest relative, my best friend, Jessica Forbes, gave me a commission to execute the first time you came into this neighbourhood. My Lord, she was a good woman, and she is dead. Do not laugh at her simple legacy."

I took from my pocket, as I spoke, the book which my Aunt had folded and directed for him herself, and laid it on the table. Then I rose to take leave.

Lord Maskelyne's thin white fingers trembled as he laid them on the book, and, for a moment, he stood silently contemplating the handwriting.

"Harry Forbes," he said suddenly, "think better of my offer. I wish to be your friend. I'm not going to laugh at that dear good soul's last gift—I wish I had deserved it better—but you may depend upon it I shall read every word. I wish I had no worse sins on my conscience than the memory of her sweet face, as I saw it, for the first and last time under the birch-trees, brings back! You are like her, and I say it again, I wish to be your friend."

"It is out of the question that I should rent the Home Farm from you, my Lord," I said firmly. "I would not accept your kind offer for any earthly consideration, and I beg you, as a favour, never to mention having made it to me. I thank you for your goodwill."

As I took up my hat Lord Maskelyne again put out his hand, and this time shook mine warmly. The next moment, in spite of his hospitable entreaties, I was making my way home through the thickly-falling rain.

I looked back at the Manor-House through the high-arched gateway, whence it was a familiar object, and saw the lambent flames still flashing palely among grey clouds above the woods by which it was backed, while I stood listening to the long rolls of distant thunder, following at intervals as the storm swept away to the Moors.

The Tempter was busily at work that evening, making me feel bitterly disappointed with myself. Providence, so the worldly-wise old Serpent argued, had put a chance of distinction in my way; and, like a fool, I had set it aside. Neighbour Hurst was a prejudiced old skinflint, who would ruin the land sooner than admit a single innovation. Had I not myself murmured at the impossibility of introducing new measures in the face of such antagonists to improvements? He had dealt hardly enough by me in childhood, when I was left to his tender mercies. The life I led at the Home Farm, before my Aunt came to take care of me, had been a cruelly hard and neglected one. Besides this, his doom was sealed. The Home Farm would soon be in other hands, and very possibly I should dislike its occupant. I might even have been the means of keeping the old man in undis-

turbed possession a little longer, if I had accepted Lord Maskelyne's offer, which had been suggested by Marguerite. I had ungraciously disregarded her kindness, and offended one who appeared to be the ruler of her actions.

"Thou shalt not do evil that good may come!" seemed suddenly written on the starry heavens as I went out into the night, trying to shake off these uneasy sensations. How could I supplant my old neighbour--remove his landmark and set up my own? I remembered the confidence he had reposed in me--the letter we had composed together.

If I could bring myself nearer to Marguerite only by treachery, time-serving, and ingratitude, we had better remain as far as the Poles asunder!

CHAPTER VIII.

"Against her ankles, as she trod,
The lucky buttercups did nod.
I leaned upon the gate to see:
The sweet thing smiled but did not speak;
A dimple came in either cheek,
And all my heart was gone from me."

JEAN INGELow.

"OUR Grandfather was only a peasant-farmer in Normandy of the same rank as yourself."

Those were the words on my lips when I woke the next morning; expecting to see, as I had done in my dream, Marguerite's tall form in the garden. The impression was so strong that I flung myself out of bed, and drew up the window-blind impatiently; but the level light, streaming across my garden from the eastern sky, showed me nothing but the straight walks bordered by espalier apple-trees, and blossoming scarlet-runners, hiding rows of useful vegetables.

I donned my rough garb, and being in no humour for work I went across the Moor to the nearest town; intending to order some hurdles to

keep out the pigs, which had made an inroad into the garden a few nights before.

There was no fog in the air that morning. The granite peaks looked as if they had been freshly washed by the violent thunderstorm. The little white wild-roses, which peeped out from heaps of stone and brambles round the Haggisthorn, were gemmed with drops of rain. The road sparkled in the sunshine; and the river rushed along, full to the top of its banks.

When I reached the spot where the bridle-road to Stonelands forked off from the main thoroughfare, I stood still. An irresistible temptation to retread the path Marguerite and I had trodden together came over me, and I yielded to it. As I had the day before me there was time enough to make a slight diversion from my intended route. I could order the hurdles on my way home

I paused again at the stone wall which I helped Marguerite and her sister to climb, and then I stepped over it. Beyond lay a wild tract of rocks and brambles, all wreathed with the small fragrant roses and honeysuckles, which the bees were rifling of their sweet freight in the warm, pure sunshine. A little path wound through this wilderness and crossed a brook, swelled by the heavy rain almost into a torrent; a few large flat stones laid down at long intervals afforded the means of crossing. Beyond was the farm and cottage called Stonelands.

The place burst upon me quite suddenly. Some trees had been cut down which formerly impeded the view. A goodly rick-yard at the back, and the peaked slated gables of the white farm-house, rising among tall trees, underneath which nestled a low, thatch-roofed cottage with a wide porch overgrown by roses, an old-fashioned garden, full of bright-coloured flowers, and a row of beehives in the sunniest corner. Neatly gravelled paths wound in and out among the gay beds and borders, and a twisted rustic paling encircled the tiny domain.

Early as was the hour, there were three females at the present moment busily occupied in the garden. One was on her knees tying up some unruly sweetpeas; another was snipping off the overgrown blossoms; the tallest of the party was nailing the straggling branches against the rose-covered porch.

It was too late to draw back without rudeness. One of the busy females had seen and recognised me, and called out joyfully to her companions, who were more engrossed with their occupation. I believe I had all along intended to do what I now professed to hesitate about. After a moment's delay I opened the garden-gate and found myself in the company of the two sisters, and of another person who seemed to be a sort of nurse or companion—perhaps a combination of both.

There was no possibility of mistaking her for

an Englishwoman. She was French in dress, in attitude, in manner, and in speech, as she stood with her thin black silk dress tucked up, and the hands, which a moment before had been so busy, thrust into her apron-pockets; chattering volubly to the two sisters in a foreign language, of which my knowledge of Latin and varied reading enabled me to understand some words, and contemplating me, as I thought, rather suspiciously.

Marguerite, who had been training the roses, turned round and greeted me with a blush. Blanche was much more exuberant in her expressions of joy at seeing me again, and reproached me for not having visited them sooner. As soon as I could make my escape from her, I took up the hammer; and nailed the uppermost branches, which, in spite of her tall stature, Marguerite could not reach, to the top of the rustic porch.

The sense of usefulness helped me to get rid of my bashfulness. We all worked merrily in the garden, and when the sun got too high overhead for the ladies, they invited me into their pretty cottage.

Madame had become reconciled to me, and understood that I had been of service to her young mistresses; for, although they treated her with affectionate respect, it seemed to me that she was of inferior rank.

Strange as it may seem, the one of the party with whom I felt myself least at ease was pretty

Mademoiselle Blanche; though she had received me so graciously. Madame und Marguerite worked with a will among the flowers, but Blanche seemed toying with her scissors; and, when she came indoors, her features wore, as she reclined languidly on her invalid couch, the same wearied expression I had noticed in Lord Maskelyne's. No one could well be less haughty than the poor girl, and yet I felt as if there were a gulf between us.

Marguerite waited upon her sister, who remained in the drawing-room whilst we partook of some slight noonday refreshment of the simplest kind, which Madame brought in with her own hands from the kitchen. I saw no servants; we attended to each other's wants in as homely a manner as might have been the case in my moorland cottage.

I forgot all about the hurdles. For aught I cared the sheep might browse upon, and the pigs rout up my young lettuces and brocoli for the next fortnight! We went out and worked hard in the garden after the sun went off the borders.

I had carried out Mademoiselle Blanche's easy-chair and embroidery-frame into a shady nook, that she might have the amusement of watching us at work. More than once, while I was finishing my task of nailing up the rose-trees and a vine that overshadowed the windows, she called me away, to ask after the white cat which had been Aunt Jessica's favourite, or the old Farm pony. These

simple creatures had their places in her memory, but I perceived that in most respects it was deficient; and that she lacked the power of reasoning upon and comparing objects that came under her observation. Perhaps this might arise in some measure from extreme debility of constitution. The slight exertion she had made in the morning had quite exhausted her, and she leant back wearily on her cushions all the afternoon, not touching her work, but following our active movements with her languid glances. Soft and kind as her manner undoubtedly was to me, I did not feel as much at ease with her as with Marguerite, and the dark-eyed, active, comely Frenchwoman.

The sun was going down behind the hills when I leaped over the boundary-wall of Stonelands. Marguerite walked thus far with me on my way home, and we stood talking for several minutes together across the barrier. I was telling her of Lord Maskelyne's proposal to give me my neighbour's place at the Home Farm. It was the only opportunity fate had afforded me of thanking her for her recommendation.

"I am sorry it was of no more use to you," she said with a sigh: "but you were quite right; Lord Maskelyne himself must approve in his heart of your loyalty."

She placed her hand in mine as she spoke, as contentedly as if I had been heir-apparent to the throne, and we parted; on my part, at all

events, regretfully. There was hope before me, however, in the future; for there were overgrown hedges and clumps of evergreens to be pruned or cleared away, in order to let in sunshine to the borders and flower-beds at Stonelands. No wood is so hard as the laurel, and Marguerite's little hatchet was already dulled. I took it away with me to sharpen it for her; promising to bring it back, and to aid in completing our labours, on the morrow.

I am not going to make any attempt at justifying myself. The risk, as I supposed, was my own, and, at that moment, I was just as incapable of listening to reason, or understanding argument, as poor pretty Mademoiselle Blanche!

Day after day my presence seemed to be necessary at Stonelands. Late in the evening, when work was over at home, if not earlier, I dropped in, with a bunch of flowers, or a basket of cherries for my invalid friend.

The young lady was rather imperious, and treated me like a slave. How grateful I felt for her importunities!

There was no road so open to Marguerite's favour as kindness to her afflicted sister. From the moment when I lifted Blanche in my arms and sheltered her beside my hearth, I believe her generous sister loved me. That is a strong word but I am not going to take it out. Let it remain where it is written.

The strongest feature of Marguerite's character was unselfishness. I do not believe that any devotion paid to herself would have had the same effect as care bestowed on the delicate being who had so few pleasures. When she saw Blanche waiting and listening for my coming, like a child who is expecting a new plaything, Marguerite's breath grew short, her own warmer heart's-beat was quickened.

In that simple country life the difference of station, if it existed, was little felt. On the Moor there is no precedence—among the garden flowers as they open and close, no stiff observance of etiquette. The bees hummed around us and the birds sang as we walked among the blossoms, and tended and watered them lovingly—I carrying the heavy pitchers for Marguerite to empty. Truly that garden was as the garden of Eden to me during that bright summer; and into our secluded Paradise no evil thoughts entered.

CHAPTER IX.

"Thousands are round us toiling as we,
Living and loving—whose lot is to be
Passed and forgotten, like waves on the sea;
Be we content then to pass into shade,
Visage and voice in oblivion laid,
And live in the light that our actions have made."

DEAN ALFORD.

I HAD not seen anything of my old neighbour, Farmer Hurst, for some time, until I met him at Church, and at his request walked home with him. He said that he wanted to talk to me; he believed that I was his best friend, and he sorely needed counsel.

Lord Maskelyne, before leaving the neighbourhood, had desired his steward to give his Uncle's old servant formal notice that he would have to quit the Home Farm. His Lordship meant to take it into his own hands.

"Of course he gives me fair notice. His Lordship is quite the gentleman, and expresses himself kindly," said the old man, as he threw open his own gate, inviting me to walk in with him. "But

I'd as soon go at once as take time to think about what must be done. I told Hutchinson I should make way for the new-comer as soon as the crops were off the ground. After Michaelmas I shall clear straight away, and settle in the town with little Susy's parents. Ah, well, I wish I could have persuaded you and her to make a match of it. From a word or two his Lordship dropped the last time he was here, I almost fancied that he would have been willing to put you in my place; only, to be sure, you are not much more up to their new-fangled ways than I am."

He looked at me inquisitively, but I bore his glance without shrinking. Had he known that I had been invited to become his successor I think his feelings would not have been so friendly—as it was, he could afford to be generous.

My old neighbour sat down by the fire and lighted his pipe, looking sorely in need of consolation.

"It must come to an end sometime," he said, "but it's hard to be turned out after a long life's service. That's where the shoe pinches, Harry."

I expressed warmly my honest feelings of regret. How glad I felt that I had played no underhand game—that I had nothing in this matter wherewith to reproach myself!

After a time Mr. Hurst began to speak more cheerfully of his prospects. His son and daughter-in-law had for some years been trying to persuade

him to strike work and settle down in the county town with them and Susan. When rheumatism or gout afflicted him, he often wished for the little maid to trot about the place and wait upon him; but her parents had no other chick, and could not spare her.

When he began to talk thus and lay out plans for the future, I thought that the black farm near the Moor was perhaps not the best possible abode for the old man; and that he would be happier by his son's cheerful hearth, with little bright-eyed Susan waiting dutifully upon her grand-sire.

Jenny Adams, the farmer's housekeeper, who had known me from a child, was looking out for me when I left the parlour, and invited me into her neat kitchen.

"What do you think about master?" she said anxiously. "It's a great risk to change all your ways when youth is over and manhood past its best. Seems to me he's breaking, Harry Forbes."

I assured her that Mr. Hurst had been speaking very cheerfully. Perhaps at his age it might be well for him to be with his family. Jenny looked doubtful. She had had a comfortable home for thirty years, and probably her own loss made her take a gloomy view of the case.

"Miss Susan is all very well," she said, with a sly glance at me; "but Mrs. Joshua is a hard woman and won't suit master—nor me, for that

matter. Anyhow I'm not going to put myself under her—but that's neither here nor there. If master had chosen to give up farming he might take to a town life, but it's different when people are driven to it sudden like; and what I can't bear to think upon is who are to come after us."

"Do you know who is to succeed Mr. Hurst?" I said. "He did not mention anyone."

"Not he—I'll warrant he'd not say a word against my Lord," said the woman passionately. "Nor I don't know about the Farm; but this much I can tell you. The dwelling-house is to be quite separate from it, with a new entrance through the garden, and a glass-house, for plants, to hide the yard and the stables and cattle-sheds. I always thought it lively and pleasant to see the beasties—but there's no accounting for fancies. No end of alterations are to be made before the old place, which was good enough for my master, honest man, is fit for Madame and the Ma'amselles. It's for *them* we are going to be turned out! Lord Maskelyne is going to put the Frenchwoman and the girls that bide down to Stonelands at the Home Farm."

The bitter malice in her tone of voice did not escape my notice. Jenny Adams had always a sharp tongue. I remembered how sternly my Aunt had rebuked her, bidding her respect the lad's tender years, when long before she had once alluded in my presence to some gossip respecting

his Lordship's connection with some person in France, which was supposed to have prevented his marrying.

Coupled with this recollection came back to me, as if I had heard them yesterday, my Aunt's words, "There was one he had wronged more cruelly than myself," which I believed referred to the same object of his attachment during Lord Maskelyne's residence on the Continent. After my Aunt's death I had often heard allusions to this story, but it was believed generally that death had closed the connection. Certainly the stout black-eyed duenna at Stonelands was not likely ever to have charmed his roving fancy and fastidious taste.

I bade Mrs. Adams good-day without asking any further questions, but I resolved to learn the whole truth, without delay, respecting Marguerite and her sister's connection with Lord Maskelyne, either from the former, or from Madame. I had never heard her called anything else, nor did I know her exact relationship to the young girls who treated her so affectionately. Our conversations with each other had hitherto been very meagre, for she spoke very bad English, and I only knew a few words of French, but we were excellent friends.

The yellow leaves were swirling away from the ash trees on the common, as I turned my back upon it and the village, and crossed the Moor. The first person I encountered at Stonelands, as

luck would have it, was neither Marguerite nor Madame, but Mademoiselle Blanche, who ran to meet me, and begged me to come and help her to find the white rabbit, which had strayed away. We were for some time occupied with our researches in yard and orchard, long enough to enable the white rabbit to make a plentiful meal in the kitchen-garden, where it had ensconced itself cunningly.

I saw Madame hanging out her cuffs and collars and stiffly starched caps on the lines in the drying-ground, but she was too busy to attend to me. When I heard her imperfect attempts at speaking our language, my heart failed me; and I resolved to wait for the opportunity fate sometimes afforded me when Marguerite was in the humour to walk back with me the first half-mile of my way home.

Marguerite did not come into the garden all the morning. When at last she made her appearance, she looked graver than usual; and said that she had been writing a letter to her Guardian, which had cost her some trouble and anxious deliberation. He wanted her to travel with him on the Continent; but of late Blanche had not been well, and her sister felt very unwilling to leave her.

"Have you travelled alone lately with your Guardian?" I said jealously. "Surely he is not old enough to make such a step advisable."

Marguerite looked up in surprise.

"He is old enough to be my father," she said, simply. "It is not that—it is Blanche I am thinking about. She has quite changed lately. Do you not notice how thoughtful she is at times, even sad? I am sure she is very ill."

"On the contrary," I said, "she seems to me in better health and spirits than usual to-day. She has been running about looking for her rabbit like a child. I always fancy that she is one."

"That is only when you are with us—she is merry enough then; but, yesterday, we expected you, at least she did, and I could not keep her quiet. In the evening, quite late, I found her at the gate, in the chill twilight, crying. She had taken it into her wise head that there was a fog creeping up, and that you would be lost on the Moor. Ah, you do not know—no one knows but myself—what warm affections my poor little sister cherishes!"

"I do believe it," I said, interrupting her—"Mademoiselle Blanche is the sweetest little lady in the world. But she is all right—I want to hear about this journey your Guardian proposes that you should take with him. Has he any claim upon your obedience?"

"Of course he has," said Marguerite, with emotion. "My Guardian has every claim a man can possess who is neither our brother, not even our uncle. I love Madame, *she* is nearly related to us, but I do not reverence her as I do our kind

protector. Blanche is just the same. He is our best earthly friend."

"How long has this been the case?" I said, relieved by her perfect candour. "When did you first see Lord Maskelyne?"

Marguerite was silent for several moments.

"I have known our Guardian longer than I can remember—longer even than Cousin Madelon," she said thoughtfully, gathering up the thread of early recollections. "Madelon was our poor father's first cousin, and came to us when the terrible news arrived that he had perished at sea. She has never since left us."

Marguerite's voice failed her for a moment, then she went on speaking in a low but firm voice:

"That is a time which Madelon cannot bear to mention, the whole family were in such trouble. I am afraid I can only tell you the history of our misfortunes very imperfectly, for I was too young to remember much about them. Blanche was an infant. Madelon gave up an excellent situation in Paris, where she was *Ménagère* in a house of business, and came to the old Farm-house in Normandy, where she had lived in her girlhood, to help us through our distress. Our sorrow was too great for words. I *do* recollect that—and how grave and sad the dear old couple used to look, who sat silent by the fireside. My grandfather and grandmother died within one week of each

other—not long after hearing of the loss of the vessel of which their only son had just been made captain. About the same time they lost a beautiful daughter—her name too was Blanche—but she was not at home when she died; I do not remember ever seeing her, and Madelon never names her. There were money difficulties to be met—and we should have been left quite desolate—I a mere child, Blanche quite a baby—but for our cousin's faithful devotion. Good and tender as she is, my poor little sister, as you know, is less able still than others to take care of herself, and she has always been very delicate. We were both, in fact, helpless.

“My earliest recollections,” Marguerite added, after a momentary pause, “are of our Guardian's great kindness. From that time he has been our chief friend and protector. Madelon is quite devoted to him, and obeys his orders scrupulously. He has never lost sight of us for long together, and never forgets us; though he says there are reasons, which he regrets, why we should not live with him altogether. In time he trusts this may be altered. In all things we respect his wishes.”

This touching but imperfect narrative did not altogether satisfy me, but I could not bear to sully that pure mind with suspicions. After a moment's reflection I asked, “Was Lord Maskelyne your

father's friend? How did he first become acquainted with your family?"

"He lived at the Château on the hill, which had formerly belonged to our Lord of the Manor; but all that was altered before I was born," said Marguerite, again trying to reknit the thread of what were evidently imperfect childish reminiscences. "It was a beautiful place, but had been long deserted. The old Count perished at the time of the great Revolution. His son was an Emigrant. Lord Maskelyne was very fond of the red-roofed castle—'Les Collines' it was called—and we used to run wild about the pretty terraced gardens when we were children. He was often absent, but he would have liked to keep his tenure of the property had it been permitted. Changes took place which enabled the old family to return. That was long after the death of our parents and grand parents, and the period of deep family sorrow which I have told you of. Was it not fortunate that we had 'such a kind friend as this good English nobleman proved to be to us, who were only the children of his neighbour at the Normandy Farm-house? He and Cousin Madelon have been to us like parents. That is, I often think, what it means in the Scripture to be a good neighbour—for what other claim had we upon him beyond being born in the homely farm-house overlooked by the tourelles of his château? and after all he

was not the lord of the soil, only a wealthy, charitable stranger."

I could not contradict her simple argument, neither did I choose to agree with it. Marguerite went on, after a pause, in the same artless manner:

"You see I am, as I told you, not a great lady. My grandfather and grandmother were honest and respectable, and they left us, when all was done for us that could be done, very moderate means of subsistence. Madelon has worked hard all her life. It is only little Blanche who has indolent habits—I suppose because we have spoilt her. Those tiny white hands never seemed fit for labour, and she was so soon tired. I am just like Madelon, never happier than when I am busy. All the clothes we wear we make for ourselves; and wash, starch, and iron the finer articles of our dress, our cambric and muslin. If it were necessary to do more, I should not shrink from it. Anything is better than to be dependent even on the kindest friends. Our own income, small as it is, suffices for our moderate wants. My Guardian, it is true, loves to give us beautiful things, and to provide us with pleasures. If we travel with him, he insists on paying our expenses; and he loves to have us with him—we cannot always refuse. Blanche is fonder of expensive trifles than I am, and he is never weary of humouring her, and makes her all sorts of presents, which I do not like to accept,

though he is just as anxious to please me. Of late I have thought that she cared most of all for that little set of book-shelves you carved for her, and the pets you tamed for us both."

"No, Marguerite—mademoiselle, I should say—the pets were all tamed for pretty Mademoiselle Blanche. I know you like better to see them sporting in the open air. But is there nothing I can do for you? no way in which I can give you pleasure? You never seem to think of yourself. This wonderful Guardian is all very well, but I see no reason why he should monopolise the privilege of contributing to your amusements and supplying your wants. Is there nothing left for me to do?"

"Yes; you may bring me the little basket I carried out into the garden when I sowed mignonne, sweet peas, and candytuft in your borders," Marguerite said laughingly, unconscious what a precious relic she was claiming; but before we parted, I had promised to bring it to her.

Perhaps the reason why I was able to converse with these young ladies without shocking them by my uncouthness, was that I had never cared to associate much with my equals or inferiors. Aunt Jessica had been for more than twenty years the companion of a thorough lady, and we were well-born ourselves—well-bred too, if not refined, cultivated gentry. The little basket Marguerite coveted had been the gift of her dear mistress and friend, as well as distant cousin.

Moreover, we were of Scottish ancestry, and in poor, remote Lowland and Highland cottage-farms, similar to the one my grandfather had purchased on the banks of the Northumberland stream, much is learned during the long winter evenings, and books which a scholar would envy may often be found. Since my aunt's death, I had led a still more secluded life near the Northern Border—alone with my few books and the many thoughts to which they gave rise.

PART THE THIRD.

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## THE STEPPING STONES.

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### CHAPTER X.

“Her spirit is tender and right as dew  
Of May-morn fresh, when stars be few;  
Her heart is harmless, simple, and true;  
All clear as waters clean that run  
Through shadow sweet, and through sweet sun,  
Her pure thoughts are.”

OWEN MEREDITH.

MY old neighbour was true to his word; and, soon after Michaelmas, the Manor Farm was empty. The Steward gave directions about the management of the land. A great deal of alteration, tending completely to separate the stockyard from the dwelling, was set on foot; and Lord Maskelyne himself came down frequently from Town to inspect the new buildings. On these occasions I took care to keep out of his way; and, for fear of meeting him there, I went very seldom to Stonelands.

One day, when I had succeeded in taming a goldfinch for Mademoiselle Blanche, I walked across the Moor, with the cage in my hand, believing that I was sure to find no London visitors at the



cottage. His Lordship had been at the Manor House the previous week, and returned to Town on Saturday; leaving ample directions for the progress of the works.

The poor young lady at Stonelands had not of late been well. Marguerite's fears had been prophetic. Her spirits were depressed; she would sit for hours, with her white hands folded together, at the window, quite unoccupied, looking out into the garden. The presents her Guardian brought her did not amuse and interest her as much as the wild birds, whose voices I had taught her to distinguish, and the little bantams I had given her, which she was constantly feeding, greatly to the detriment of Madame and Marguerite's neatly tended borders; but they never complained, and could not deny her anything.

As her bodily health declined I fancied—it might be only imagination—that her memory and intellect became stronger and clearer. It struck me at times that the sense of her own mental deficiency had, for the first time, dawned upon her and affected her spirits. She was no longer the fair, guileless, unreflecting, childlike creature I had lifted in my arms on the Moor; but a very feeble, suffering, sensitive woman. Vividly alive as Marguerite was to any symptom of decline in her sister's health, this important mental change seemed to escape her notice.

Blanche received my simple gift with much



pleasure. Her pale cheek flushed, and her lustreless eyes kindled, as she fondled the bird, which flew to her bosom and nestled there for protection. Then she put it back into its cage, and set it down beside her.

"Is it right," she said, thoughtfully, "to deprive any living thing of liberty for our own gratification?"

I was startled; for, spoilt as she had been from infancy, in general Blanche was not unselfish. All living things, from her sister downwards, had appeared to be her ministers. Though not cruel by nature, she was, from infirmity of health, unsympathetic. I myself was still too much of a country youth to trouble myself greatly about the feelings of a captive bird.

"The little creature is so tame that it would be a shame to let it fly," I said; somewhat hurt at the thought that all the trouble I had taken to please her should be thrown away. "The wild birds would soon peck it to death if you gave it its liberty. I found it under a bush, where it had fallen out of a nest. Your new pet has never known freedom."

"So much the better," said the girl gravely, almost bitterly. "It is best never to know what we have lost." She looked round anxiously. "Have you seen Marguerite, or Madame? Is there no one to welcome you but me?"

"I came only to bring you the bird," I said. "I am afraid you are not so well to-day, and that



talking is not good for you. Shall I go away?" "No—no!" she said hurriedly; "on the contrary, I wanted to see you." She hesitated. "Only, when I try to speak, words will not come—or they flow too fast. I am not like Marguerite, able to say just what is right and no more. Sometimes my thoughts come rushing, and I feel afraid to let them out—as if I knew not whither they might lead me!"

A bright blush called back her former great beauty to her face. She put up her hands to hide her glowing cheeks.

"I think *you* see a difference in me lately, Mr. Forbes. No one else does, unless it be my kind Guardian, who is uneasy about my health, and brings fresh advisers to consult about it every time he comes here. Marguerite makes me hate myself by showing, what I never saw before, how, all day long and every day, she sacrifices herself and her own wishes for me. How odiously selfish I must have been; but perhaps it will be forgiven me. I do not think that I shall be judged harshly, for I am one to whom little was given—until lately I never knew how little!" — she added passionately, while, above and through the slender fingers still pressed against her cheek, I could see the blush deepen painfully. "I believe Marguerite would give all she most values on earth to afford me the merest, the most childish gratification; and it is terrible to think that, not long since, I should have accepted it! That year after year I have



gone on profiting by her generous affection, scarcely thanking her for all she has done for me. But something has taken away the cloud from my heart. Do you think," she added, in a low whisper, "that it is the Death-Angel's cold fingers that have touched me?"

I was very much affected. Blanche dropped her hands and looked at me fixedly. Her bright blushes had faded. Under the blue eyes were dark half-circles. The half-parted lips were white, the fair skin drawn, the veins on the temples throbbing visibly. I could even see how quickly her heart was beating.

"You are not strong," I said; "you must not let your mind dwell on such painful reflections. The best return you can make to your sister for her unselfish affection—it is as beautiful a thing as any mortal can exhibit—is to get well quickly."

"Perhaps I may never be well again," said Blanche, simply. "But do not tell Marguerite that I said so. Though I should grieve to part from her—to leave the friends who have been so kind to me—I am ready. The good God who made me what I am, will not be too hard upon me. When I am in heaven I shall be one of His angels, though on earth I have not been—I never should be—a perfect woman."

We heard Madame's quick foreign accents in the garden. Blanche busied herself with her new favourite. In every action there was a gentle



womanliness, a consideration for the feelings of the feathered captive, which had hitherto been wanting. Marguerite's first glance rested on her sister. I think that she was very much struck by the change in her appearance; but Blanche was eager to show how tame the bird was, and manifested no depression. On the contrary, her manner was even joyous; and she thanked me with exuberant gratitude for the trouble I had taken to please her.

We were all talking together, when suddenly the door opened, and, unannounced, Lord Maskelyne and another gentleman entered the room. I had an invincible repugnance to seeing our Lord of the Manor in the company of the two sisters; and, whilst Madame, in French fashion, welcomed him volubly, and the two girls embraced him as they might have done a father, I slipped away, as I believed unnoticed.

I had not reached the stone boundary of the Moor, however, when I heard a voice calling me; and, on looking back, I perceived that Lord Maskelyne had followed, and was trying to overtake me. I was forced to wait for him.

As soon as he could regain his breath, his Lordship upbraided me for running away from him. He then told me that his companion from London was an eminent physician, who had been at Stonelands several times to see poor little Blanche. She required the most skilful care, and



his own uneasiness on her account was so great, that, being convinced his present medical adviser understood her case better than anyone he had yet consulted, Lord Maskelyne had persuaded him to pay her another visit, in the hope of his being able to discover what was amiss.

"Have you noticed," he said, "that as her frame decays, the poor, pretty creature's mind becomes stronger? Harry, if she lives that girl may yet be as good and clever as she is beautiful. I would lay down my life to save her—to see her in mind, as she is in person, the image of her sweet mother."

His voice betrayed real emotion, but I felt no sympathy for the vain worldling, who had blighted the lives of two beings who loved him.

"My Lord," I said, "I am afraid human skill will prove unavailing. Mademoiselle Blanche has just told me that she does not expect to recover, and I fear such impressions often fulfil themselves."

"She told you so?" he said, sorrowfully. "Poor little darling!" His voice broke, and he paused; then he added, more cheerfully: "How came she to confide in you so deeply, Harry?"

"Indeed, I cannot tell you, my Lord," I answered; "except it were that she perceived I was more aware of the change which had lately taken place in her than even her sister. You have been still more observant."

"My eyes were quickened by affection, but



she would not say a word on the subject to me." Then he said, abruptly— "Harry, I will tell you a secret!"

"Pardon me, my Lord," I said, while I felt the blood mount to my forehead, "if I decline to hear it. There are feelings struggling within me at this moment to which I should be unwilling to give utterance. I would rather not be in your confidence."

Lord Maskelyne's cheek flushed as hotly as my own.

"You foolish boy!" he said, have you so many friends in this cold world that you pertinaciously resolve to keep me at arm's length? But you cannot make an enemy of me. I wish your good Aunt were alive! She would not be so unforgiving—and, at this moment, it is I who want a friend."

His words recalled me to my better self.

"Say on, my Lord; since you call upon me in my Aunt's name, you can have no evil deed to record. I am ready to listen."

"My description of Blanche's remarkable change of condition since his last visit made my learned friend suspect that new influences were at work. His inquiries were most minute, at first I thought them insignificant, principally touching upon what afforded her pleasure. A fresh light dawned upon him when I confessed with some irritation that I had ransacked the shops of London and Paris in



vain to gratify her. Formerly a new dress, a trinket, would make her blue eyes glisten, but now she received everything I took down for her with indifference; preferring before them a stone picked up on the Moor, or a wild flower treasured in a cup of water. Hereupon I had to answer another set of questions, and the learned physician arrived at the conclusion that it was not the stone nor the flower his patient cared for, but the bringer of these gifts. In each case, Harry, this proved to be yourself; and at the first glance cast upon you and Blanche, when we entered unannounced and unexpectedly, as my clever friend wished, the drawing-room at Stonelands, and the trembling girl saw that you were about to leave us: 'There is the answer to your question!' my sagacious medical adviser whispered to me. '*Love* is Mademoiselle Blanche's present disorder, and—that is the man.'

The Hebrew King was not more suddenly struck down by the words of the Prophet than I was by Lord Maskelyne's unexpected revelation.

In an instant there flashed across my recollection words and looks and incidents which had not betrayed the innocent girl's secret at the time, but which, now that the light was let in, brought it out vividly.

Lord Maskelyne walked on silently beside me. At last he said:

"Think it over. I believe that Blanche loves



you, and that, by returning her affection, you may win her back to life and reason; just as, by rejecting the gift, you may consign her to an early grave. Do not imagine that I blame you. Fortunately you are not in fault. I have not the slightest doubt that you were entirely ignorant of her infatuation. I only wish my own conscience, with regard to the past, were as clear as I firmly believe yours to be at this moment."

Lord Maskelyne shook hands with me warmly, and, without another word, left me alone with my own thoughts upon the Moor. I turned off the track in the direction of Haggisthorn Peak, and cast myself down on the stone ledge where I had first seen Blanche and her sister. From that moment I remembered how the hapless creature had clung to me; and however feeble, at that time, her intellect had appeared to be, every incident connected with my Moorland Farm, and with the protection I had afforded them on that night, had never faded from her mind. The flowers I gathered, the minerals I knocked out of the rocks, the birds or animals I tamed for her, had been the delicate girl's unfailing sources of amusement. Even the petty tyrannies she had practised, and in which I had humoured her, now appeared in another light. An unspeakable compassion filled my soul for the gentle being whose one single deep emotion—the first that had stirred the hitherto untroubled waters



of her soul—might be love for one who could never return it!

Could it be true that I possessed over her the fearful power Lord Maskelyne attributed to me—that I could strengthen that feeble intellect and restore the mental faculties to their natural use? When I recalled her grave, sweet earnestness at our last interview—when I saw, in thought, the clear but unfathomable blue eyes raised to mine with such melancholy wistfulness, I almost feared that it was so; and I shrank from inflicting a blow that might extinguish that dawning light. Must I sacrifice my own hopes, my own feelings, and try to save a fellow-creature, this young beautiful girl, from death, or from a yet darker night of misery?

What would Marguerite say? What would Marguerite urge me to do? Would she, in this case as in most others, think only of her sister? or were there thoughts and aspirations in our hearts which would make such self-abnegation utterly impossible?

At this point my thoughts went back to Lord Maskelyne. I felt the very strongest reluctance to allying myself with him. Lowly as was my origin, the Scottish women of my family had all been pure wives, mothers, and maidens. No connection by the left hand with nobility sullied their reputation! Perhaps this objection *might* apply equally to Marguerite; but, in spite of reason and probability, I never brought it to bear upon the question



of my strong affection for her. With regard to Blanche, it appeared to me an insurmountable objection. If I could have overcome every other kind of disinclination this would have remained. Every time I looked at her, if I agreed to make her my wife, I should be reminded by her fair aristocratic features—by her indolent grace—by the resemblance I had lately traced to Lord Maskelyne—that she was an illegitimate scion of the English aristocracy. Her beauty was valueless in my eyes, as reminding me of lineaments which had wrought so much woe. How could I place in my home—in the room of Aunt Jessica—this helpless creature—bearing in every line of her fair face the likeness of the man who had won Jessica Forbes's affection in sport, and trifled with her happiness, previous to forming more objectionable ties, which entailed upon his innocent offspring the punishment due to his own vices and frailties!

Lord Maskelyne was too thoroughly well-bred to betray any feeling of displeasure when, at our next meeting, which took place at my own house, I declined his liberal offers. He wished me to become his tenant at the Home Farm, which he told me was left, with an ample fortune, to Mademoiselle Blanche at his own death. A handsome portion was also assigned to her on her marriage. But at this point I stopped him, begging him not to enter into further details. I trusted that he was mistaken in his impression of the young lady's



too favourable opinion of me, and that the interest she had manifested in my simple gifts betokened only a revival of the faculties which had so long lain dormant. She would always command my warmest esteem and regard.

We parted better friends than could have been expected; and his Lordship expressed a lively interest in my prospects, offering to forward them by any means in his power. After walking round my fields and garden he left me, wondering no doubt at the infatuation of the man who preferred independence in such a nutshell to all that he could proffer.

In less than a week Stonelands was deserted. Madame and the young ladies, I heard, were gone to Italy. The Manor House was left in the charge of the superannuated gardener and his deaf spouse, and the contemplated improvements at the Home Farm were postponed until the spring.

No communication took place between me and the two sisters. Lord Maskelyne considered—and under his view of the subject I could not deny that he was right—that for the present Blanche and I ought not to meet. Neither letter nor message of leave-taking was vouchsafed to me by Marguerite.



## CHAPTER XI.

"My harp was made from stunted tree,  
The growth of Glendale's barest lea;  
Yet fresh as prouder stems it grew,  
And drank with leaf as green the dew;  
Bright showers, from Till or Bivent shed,  
Its roots with needful moisture fed;  
Gay birds, Northumbrian skies that wing,  
Amid its branches loved to sing;  
And purple Cheviot's breezy air  
Kept up a life-like quivering there."

AFTER my turnip-fields, of which, like most northern farmers, I was very proud, had been, as the hinds say, limed at "back-end," meaning autumn, I spent a long, dull, solitary winter. The light-heartedness and springy tread of youth seemed gone; my spirits were heavy as lead. Work no longer delighted me. I could not put the same heart into it now that I had no one to interest themselves in and profit by my labours. More than ever I missed my dear old Aunt; and felt that, since Adam was set to till the garden of Eden, it has been desirable that man should have a helpmate.



When the work-people re-appeared at the Manor Farm, I determined to have something done to my own old house, and consulted the builder employed by Lord Maskelyne. Unconsciously a woman's comfort was my chief consideration, and a report was soon circulated that I was about to bring a mistress home. Farmer Hurst had come over with his grand-daughter to see my improvements, and Susan admired extremely the neatly tiled floor of the new dairy, and the fresh curtains, carpets, and papers all over the house. The little maiden, as I well knew, had a reason of her own for studying the accessories of a home, for by this time I was in her confidence. Though I believe I had once been a favourite, I was superseded, constancy not being Susan's strong point. The young farmer who was to succeed Mr. Hurst at the Home Farm had been staying, till the alterations were completed, at the town where his father and mother resided, and had been quietly courting our bonnie Moorland lassie. When Susan said blushing that, after all, though she liked the ways of her kindred and the town-life well enough, she would rather live at the Manor Farm than in the Queen's palace, I guessed that she was to be my neighbour; and when I asked if my supposition was correct, she did not contradict me.

Time passed on; the workmen departed. I paid my bills for new furniture and alterations, which cost a great deal more than I expected; but



I did not feel a bit happier or better satisfied with the result of the outlay. I only wondered why on earth I had made such a fool of myself! No human being, I myself least of all, seemed likely to derive comfort or benefit from my unwonted extravagance, which had hampered me considerably. Again I began to think of travelling—of studying, as Lord Maskelyne had suggested, the modes of farming pursued in other countries. Other landlords besides our crotchety Baron were beginning to try experiments on our Northern Moors; tracts where nought but ling had grown were being dug up, and our old clumsy ploughs and harrows were being discarded. The agriculturists in our northern districts hoped in time to rival the busy and prosperous miners and manufacturers south of Tyne.

When I was in my most dissatisfied moods I thought of the flattering partiality which Lord Maskelyne and his medical friend and adviser had imagined on the part of Blanche for myself; and I laughed bitterly at the idea of one so uninstructed and utterly without prospect for the future having inspired either of those delicate girls with affection. Yet, surely, Marguerite had said:

“I am like yourself. I am not of noble birth. I am only the grand-daughter of a peasant-farmer in Normandy.”

Those words had ever since been treasured in my memory. Though I feared that they had led me into a fatal error, I strove vainly to forget



them. The glow of sincerity with which they were spoken had fixed them in my recollection. Neither time nor absence—not even the gradual fading of the hopes they had inspired—could obliterate them.

Never had I felt so dissatisfied with my small Moorland farm as I did during that stormy inclement spring. When I saw the improvements in progress elsewhere, I felt the lack of knowledge as well as of capital most bitterly. Cutting frosts and heavy falls of snow were followed by howling winds which devastated our exposed uplands. Then rain came down in torrents, flooding the recently reclaimed Moorland, and reducing it well-nigh to its former state of bog and morass.

A dull heavy canopy of cloud hung perpetually above the heights of the neighbouring chain of hills, never quite dispelled even by the violent gusts blowing across the Moor. Every object round me seemed wrapped in gloom and discomfort. It was difficult to believe that the season had returned when I had brought the French sisters to the Farm and felt proud and happy while they were my guests.

For want of something better, or worse, to do, I sat down and began to compose an advertisement. After a little consideration, I determined not to part altogether with my little freehold; but to let it, with the power of taking advantage of a break in the tenure at certain intervals. Now



that the dwelling-house was put in order, it might suit a sportsman; and I should be able to put in practice my great wish of obtaining better knowledge of my profession. In time I might return, more qualified to make a livelihood and some provision for the future out of my scanty inheritance. Fortune might favour me in some unexpected manner. Meanwhile, I meant to take a passage across the Atlantic, and see what farming was like in America.

I had not got far in setting forth the recommendations of what appeared to me at the moment a most undesirable residence, when a sunbeam slanting in through the casement disturbed me. I had not seen the distant hills for a week; but there they were, standing out clearly against the blue sky. Down went my pen, and, leaving the writing materials and sundry blotted pages scattered about on the table and floor, I went out of the house.

Wild havoc had indeed this time been made by the tempest. The ground was strewn with great limbs and boughs of the trees, and the leaves had fallen as if we were in the middle of autumn instead of spring. The brook had made a fresh course for itself through the garden, besides flooding its banks. I went to see how it fared with the livestock, and to give directions for making a drain to carry off the superfluous water.

When the Widow Brand—who had, since her cottage was blown down in the winter, taken up



her abode in my house with her lame daughter—came to lay the cloth for dinner, she told me that the gale had done a great deal of mischief. The large stack of chimneys at the Manor House, which had so long threatened to come down, had fallen during the night; and old Stephen Marter, the gardener, who had persisted in declaring that it was all safe, had been nearly buried under the ruins. His deaf wife had never heard a sound; but woke in the morning with a cartload of stones on her bed, pinning down the counterpane and dividing her from her poor husband, who had fainted away. People had warned the old couple over and over again not to occupy the room in the north wing, just under the great tottering chimneystack; but they would not take advice.

Upon hearing of the bodily injuries thus sustained, my own morbid sense of suffering seemed to grow less; and I went down the road to see if I could be of any use to my neighbours.

The grand terrace in front of the Manor House was strewn with rubbish. Several of the aged trees had fallen. One of them lay right across the moat, just where I had seen the water illuminated by the red lightning-flashes while I sat with Lord Maskelyne in his library. The place looked more desolate than ever.

Men were at work digging and delving among the ruins, and gossiping as to the cause of the disaster. I asked if anyone had written to his



Lordship, but I could get no intelligible answer. To-morrow, it appeared, was Hutchinson's day for coming over. The Rector was absent, stopping at the Bishop's palace. At present no one had troubled themselves with more than the visible signs of the catastrophe. As there was already a superabundance of hands at work, doing little or nothing, I went through the open hall door and up the front staircase, from which there was a communication with the corridor into which the room opened where the injured man was lying.

The old gardener had recovered his senses, and was in a better condition than I expected. The fright had scared and stunned him, but no bones were broken. His dame, he said, had not been touched, though a ton of stone fell close to her head. He supposed, as she had not heard that, she would hear nothing till the Day of Judgment.

"It's a mercy," he added, "that none of the gentlefolks was to-home, Mr. Forbes. I got a message to say that the young ladies—them as used to bide down to Stonelands—had come back and was agoing to picnic in the woods and make a day of it; but I suppose the rain stopped them. If so be they had come I should have put 'em up in the north wing. I never minded what meddling folk chose to say about the big chimney. For certain, I thought it would last *my* time, and that part of the house was better aired than the state-



rooms. Master usually stopped in the library and the bed-chamber over it, and ordered fires to be kept up to air the books."

"I did not know that the young ladies were in the country," I said, as calmly as I could. "Had you any note or message? Whom did you expect?"

The old man looked puzzled.

"In course, it was Miss Marget that wrote—t'other little thing never was much of a hand with her pen, though she was such a pretty creature. My Lord thought a deal of Miss Marget. She's a grand woman, and writes like a clerk. As for the bit of paper, 'twas but a scrap, though easy enough to read. You'll find it in my jacket-pocket."

Among sundry parcels of seed and strips of matting I found a small note in Marguerite's clear handwriting, saying that she and her sister, with a party of friends, would be at the Manor House at an early hour, and remain for the whole day. The signature, very firmly and plainly written, was Marguerite Duval.

"She would never use no other name," the old man said; "nor I won't say she isn't right. She's proud of her honest birth. To my certain knowledge, for I heard him say it when I was pruning the laurels, my Lord has offered to adopt her, share and share alike with her cousin that she always calls sister, Mademoiselle Blanche, who's



as like him as two peas. It don't so much matter for that poor little crittur! Best for her to have a living parent as is disposed, whatever his faults may have been, to make amends to her. No good for the little lady to trouble at what hand she gets the good things that lighten her load of affliction."

I listened to the good old fellow's rambling talk with a new light breaking in upon me. Certainly there never was a trifling effort of Christian love or neighbourly kindness so richly rewarded. Promising to see him again in a few days I bade him good-bye, after undertaking to write an account to his Lordship, who was a kind master, of the accident which had befallen his old servant.

No one is so sure to know the truth respecting a family secret as an aged domestic, no matter how stupid and prejudiced he may be. I was quite certain when I stepped out of that sick-chamber that Marguerite was the legitimate daughter and grand-daughter of men of the same rank as myself, belonging to the upper class of peasantry, under the old régime, in France. Blanche with her aristocratic beauty and languor, I could easily believe, was the descendant, on one side (perhaps through some clandestine or illegal union with a woman of an inferior station), of our hereditary lords of the soil.

The day had worn to its close whilst I sat talking to my old neighbour, and when I came



through the gateway of the Manor House the sky was set thick with stars. Though barred with clouds there were rifts of clear blue, and, far down in the West, a bright ray, the last gleam of twilight, glittered on the Moorland stream. I realised for the first time that Marguerite was near me when I saw the evening star shining over the waste in the direction of Stonelands and the Haggisthorn.



## CHAPTER XII.

"The Dawn's red fingers  
Slant o'er the sky;  
The maiden lingers:  
I know not why.

"Short grow the shadows  
On wood and stream,  
They leave the meadows  
An emerald green.

"The bright brooks glitter  
Beneath the sky,  
The gay birds twitter  
And Heavenwards fly.

"Ah, perfect beauty,  
If I may woo,  
I'll do my duty—  
Fly Heavenwards too."

MORTIMER COLLINS.

IT rained again heavily in the night, but next morning the clouds passed off, leaving the distant summits of the Cheviots sharply marked against the blue sky. The great boulder on the Moor,



and the nearer range of heights, seemed as if just washed by the tempest, so distinctly did each remarkable feature of that wild northern landscape stand out from its background of grey moor in the uninterrupted sunshine.

As I walked beside our brimming rivulet, I remembered one of the Border songs dear to Aunt Jessica, which she used to sing when I was a boy, and I could not help repeating it aloud, with the gush of the water over the pebbles for an accompaniment:

“Oh, freshly from his mountain hold  
Comes down the rapid Tyne:  
But Coquet's still the stream o' streams,  
So let her still be mine.  
There's mony a sawmon lies in Tweed,  
An' mony a trout in Till;  
But Coquet—Coquet, aye for me,  
If I may have my will.

“Nae mair we'll fish the coaly Tyne,  
Nae mair the oozy Team,  
Nae mair we'll try the sedgy Pout,  
Or Derwent's woody stream;  
But we'll awa' to Coquet's side,  
For Coquet bangs them a',  
Whose winding streams sae sweetly glide  
By Brinkburn's bonny Ha'!”

The weather was too fine to last, and I was not surprised some hours later, when I recrossed the Moor, to see peak and cairn, hill and river, suddenly obscured by a downpour of rain.



I thought myself fortunate when the storm overtook me, in finding myself near the only building which for miles in that direction reared its front against the savage blasts which swept over the Moors. The time had not arrived when human enterprise and commercial speculation were to penetrate into the stony bosom of the hills. We had as yet escaped the far-sighted vision of modern improvers. That rude hostelry could boast little of the progress of science and art either in its architectural construction, or in the comforts afforded by its internal arrangements.

Early as it was in the year, however, a party of pleasure-seekers had been abroad on the Moor, and had taken shelter with myself in the only place of refuge it afforded. I saw the two sturdy damsels who performed the functions of waitress and chambermaid dash down and catch up again piles of rude ware on the deal kitchen-table, and heard them inveighing strongly against the unconscionable desires of the party in the parlour. It was well that the plates and dishes could stand rough usage.

Fastidious travellers might well murmur at the reception afforded them at that rude North-country inn! I was sorry for the doubtless wet and weary wanderers when I saw clouds of smoke coming from the sitting-room, where whirling eddies of wind met the flames striving to ascend from a fire hastily kindled in a cold chimney. After the



party had partaken of such refreshments as could be procured, I was not much surprised to see them emerge from that smoky region. One gentleman found his way to the stables, to ascertain whether the horses had fared as well or ill as themselves. Another stood dismally contemplating the utterly hopeless aspect of the sky, deriving some comfort from a cigar. Two of the ladies at last found the chilling, smoky atmosphere of the best, indeed, only parlour intolerable; and took refuge in the more cheery, old-fashioned kitchen, by far the most comfortable part of the house, and for the moment deserted by its usual occupants. The sturdy country girls were washing up the dishes in the scullery.

I had drawn back into the shadow cast by the projecting wall, which almost made the hearth-place into a second room, to make way for those who might need warmth more than I did, having already sufficiently dried myself after the drenching shower. No one noticed my presence, and for a short time I scarcely considered it necessary to reveal it. One very pretty girl was standing with her neatly-shod foot resting on the fender, talking, in a foreign language quite unintelligible to me, to her friend, whom, at first, I did not recognise. Was it possible, when the flame on the hearth suddenly shot up and shone upon her features, that the beautiful face suddenly illuminated, bright with happiness and intellect, could belong to



Mademoiselle Blanche? that the thrilling tones so exquisitely modulated were the once plaintive accents of the poor little half-educated, unformed, but impressionable creature for whom I had tamed black-birds, thrushes, and gold-finches, and assisted to make hutches and cages for her furry and feathered favourites? I thought of the evening when I had lifted her from the stone ledge under Haggisthorn Peak, and borne her, a light weight in my arms, over the Moor; when her plumed hat and scarlet cloak, with her sister's, had been dried at my hearth. Now she was more womanly in appearance; her manner, though softer and sweeter, was much more animated. Mind and body had evidently gained strength together.

Clad in light, bright dresses, suitable, it might be possibly imagined, for the month of May, but ill-adapted for the aspect it had assumed on the Northern Moors at that changeful season, the young ladies were evidently glad of the warmth. An invincible bashfulness took possession of me, and I resolved to leave the place clear for the gay party who no doubt would soon re-assemble.

I hoped that I might succeed in making my escape unnoticed, but the instant I moved, the two girls turned round, and caught sight of me. The next moment my hand was warmly clasped in that of Mademoiselle Blanche. It was too late to think of getting away. She had recognised me.

"Did you not know me? Well, I suppose I



am altered," she said, blushing vividly. "But still, as soon as you came out of that dark corner I recognised *you*—in spite of that great black beard! We were on our way to see you when the storm drove us to this dreadful place for shelter—such a desolate spot!" she added, looking round with a shudder at the bare rafters and whitewashed walls. "So different to the lovely old Farm-house where you took such care of us. I am quite well and go wherever I like; and I said my first really independent act—for Marguerite humours me as much as ever, and really when they are all my slaves there is not much pleasure in having my own way—should be to come and thank you for all your kindness. Where can Marguerite be? She and Frank would stop to look at the view from the Peak, you remember Haggisthorn, where you first took pity upon us. By this time they must be washed away; the rock would give them less shelter and comfort than even this rude shanty."

"I am sorry I cannot wait to see your sister," I said, somewhat roughly; for I was sorry to find that it was only Blanche who wished to visit my Farm. "The rain is nearly over, and I must make the best of my way home." Then repenting of my ungraciousness, I said: "It gives me the greatest pleasure to see you looking so well, and to hear that you are able to take more exercise."

Blanche looked at me with surprise. "Yes, I am better; but it is you who have changed. Do



you mean to say that you will not wait to see Marguerite—that you are not going to ask us to come and see you at the Farm? My sister would never forgive me if I allowed you to go away without speaking to her, or making some arrangement for meeting another day. It is too late to cross the Moor now. She and Frank are sure to be back immediately.”

“No, I cannot wait,” I said, drawing my hand away. “Mademoiselle Marguerite may be detained longer than you anticipate—is no doubt better engaged; or she and her companion—if he is a stranger—may have lost their way. I have no time to lose, for I am a busy man now, busier than ever; and your gay party would find my homely Farm a sorry place of rendezvous.”

“Marguerite is not better engaged,” said Blanche, indignantly. “I dare say she and Frank have been quarrelling, or talking nonsense ever since they insisted on being left behind. Marguerite wanted to make him admire the view from the Peak, but he was full of enthusiasm about Gamle Norge,\* and could not see anything wonderful in our old hills and stony Druidical relics. We left them discussing the point *con amore*.”

Her friend laughed, and whispered a few words which made Blanche blush rosy red. For my part, her suggestions had not improved my temper,

\* Old Norway.



and I again bade her a hurried good-bye; and started off through blinding torrents of rain, in spite of her protestations, across the Moors, which looked duller and greyer than ever through the descending torrent. I did not feel surprised that the Norwegian tourist found little to notice in them, if indeed he had a thought to spare from his fair companion.

By one of those strange transitions of temperature which belong to the spring, especially in a hilly district, the rain passed off just as I reached the Haggisthorn. The old grey pillar stood up clear of mist, wreathed with its first May garland—its first and freshest. The brook, swelled by the storm which had swept over the Moor, rushed on like a miniature torrent. A storm-cock was sitting on the topmost twig of the hawthorn tree, carolling a farewell to the tempest.

As I drew nearer I perceived resting on the stone ledge, said to have been a place of sacrifice, something white, light, and fragile, fluttering in the breeze. It proved to be a lady's fine cambric handkerchief, embroidered at one corner with a wreath of daisies, enclosing the initial letter M., exactly similar to the one which I had laid up in lavender in my boyhood. I could not help taking it up and holding it for an instant reverentially. Then I laid it down in the same place.

A light step—a rustle like the wind sweeping over long grass. I turned and saw, close



beside me, a tall, slender, graceful form, clad in silken garments, here and there glistening with rain-drops—a blushing, beautiful face looking at me reproachfully.

“Are you going to run away from me, Harry Forbes?” was the question put to me by sweet trembling lips as I stood hesitating whether and how I should address their owner.

“The brook is swollen almost into a river,” she said. “The stepping-stones you placed for us are almost all covered. I was wondering how I should get across.”

Marguerite was apparently quite alone on the Moor. I could not help offering her assistance, though I could scarcely force myself to speak. She also was silent.

It took some time to collect several large white stones from the bottom of the Tor, where some had fallen, and to place them in the brook. During this operation, in which Marguerite assisted me, neither of us uttered a syllable.

Our work was done at last, but Marguerite was unusually timid. Over and over again I had watched her admiringly as she sprang lightly from stone to stone, disdaining aid, whilst her cowardly little sister clung to my arm. Now it was Marguerite's turn to tremble, and her footing was unsteady. I could not be such a churl, since—probably owing to some lover's quarrel—better aid than mine was not at hand, as not to help



her in the crossing. White foaming wavelets of water curled past her little feet as she set them slowly and hesitatingly forward one after the other. When half-way over she seemed suddenly to turn giddy, and but for my support would have slipped into the eddying, brawling stream. The other half of the passage was more easily accomplished; but Marguerite, still pale and trembling, continued to lean upon me as we stood on the bank.

"Why were you left alone?" I said, giving way at last to an irresistible impulse. "Was your friend frightened at the storm on the Moor? It is strange that women always like butterflies whose gay colours are spoilt by rain! Was the wind too strong for him? Your sister, whom I met at the Inn, said that your cavalier was infatuated about Norway. He must have seen wild weather there. I wonder it drove him from your side when you most needed protection."

Marguerite looked astonished.

"Why should you blame Frank? I sent him to see whether Blanche was safe. You know she always needed attention more than I did. It was my own wish to remain alone for a short time under the Haggisthorn."

The soft, low tone of her voice as it dwelt on the last word subdued my resentment.

"Mademoiselle Blanche is quite changed, I said, remembering her unselfish love for her sister. "She looks more gay and independent, and would



have skipped over the stepping-stones quite easily. What has caused such an alteration in her?"

"Oh, there have been many reasons," said Marguerite. "The climate did wonders; and, when she was able to go into society during the winter, my poor little sister was wonderfully admired,—and loved," she added after a pause, softly.

"And you?" I said, venturing to look into her face as I walked on beside her; "I do not think you look as contented as you used to do. Is love less soothing to you than to your sister? Has it not made you happy?"

Marguerite—I suppose she had got the better of her faintness—took her arm away. She looked pained and startled.

"I am not a creature made for love, like Blanche," she said, rather bitterly. "Society is not my element. I did not enjoy the parties at Florence half so much as she did. Our positions, too, were different; for though I can never learn to call her anything else, we are not really sisters. Lord Maskelyne has acknowledged Blanche as his daughter. Her mother, my father's youngest sister, died early. We are only cousins, but we do not love each other less. When her health is quite re-established"—Marguerite hesitated and blushed deeply—"In a short time, I can scarcely bear to think of it, my little darling Blanche and I must part."

Her meaning was obvious. Released from the charge which had lain upon her girlhood, Marguerite



was free—free to reward the lover who had, no doubt, waited long and patiently.

I scarcely know what words passed my lips. They were few and strong, wild and incoherent. Marguerite seemed scarcely to understand their meaning, and there was not time to make it clear; for across the Moor, now flooded with sunshine, with an impatient cavalier riding in front, the party I had left at the Inn were approaching. I did not wait for them, but hastily bade her a farewell, which I meant to be for ever, at the stepping-stones over the Moorland rivulet.



# PART THE FOURTH.

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## ACROSS THE BORDER.

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### CHAPTER XIII.

"Oh, why left I my hame?  
Why did I cross the deep?  
Oh, why left I the land  
Where my forefathers sleep?  
I sigh for Scotia's shore,  
And I gaze across the sea:  
But I canna get a blink  
O' my ain countrie."

GILFILLAN.

I DID not go into my usual sitting-room when I got back to the Farm, though Mrs. Brand told me there was a letter on the mantelpiece, waiting for me; the carrier had found it among the straw at the bottom of his cart, and had called with it himself. He hoped the delay was of no consequence. I was drenched to the skin; wretched in mind and body. No communication was likely to reach me which would lessen my discomfort.

When I came downstairs, freshly clothed, and more in my right mind, I had forgotten all about the letter. It might have remained in the straw at the bottom of the market-cart till doomsday for aught I cared; but the moment I went up to



the fireplace, where Dame Brand had set it up conspicuously, the deep black border attracted my attention. I was also struck by the resemblance to Aunt Jessica's handwriting, and guessed that some further cause for unhappiness—some deep family sorrow—had befallen me. There is no truer saying than that misfortunes never come alone!

The letter was, as I expected, from my Uncle George—Aunt Jessica's twin brother—who had been so long in exile. Only a little while before I had been thinking of joining him and my cousins in America; and now I was told, in a few brief lines full of bitter grief, that he had lost both his young sons by a fever which had devastated the district in which he had settled, as it appeared prosperously, and made a tolerable fortune. He had come home now, fearing to lose his one only treasure, a daughter; and he begged me, if not imperatively detained, to come at once to them.

My Uncle had been informed, before the death of his boys, that a farm was to be sold near the Border, on the Scottish side, which had once belonged to our family, and he had bought it. That home-sickness to which none are more a prey than north-countrymen, had of late years crept upon him, and he desired to die at home. Perhaps there was time enough to think about that—though death seemed to have taken giant strides since the one which had stepped between him and his bonnie



lads—that fell sweep of the scythe which had swept them down behind him. Still he had his Jessie—and the lass was too young to be left fatherless in a strange land. Next to her, I was his nearest of kin, and he wanted to make acquaintance with me.

The wish was so natural that I could hardly have refused to grant it, even if it had not fallen in strangely with my own inclinations. I could not bear the thought that any moment might bring upon me an incursion of the gay holiday party I had met at the Moorland Inn. Blanche had said they were on their way to beat up my quarters. The storm which had baffled them would probably soon pass off, and leave the way clear.

Mrs. Brand scarcely looked surprised when I said that I had just heard of deaths in our small family, which would take me away from home, and I might be detained for some time. She was too old a friend not to be told the particulars of my bereavement; and she entered fully into my sorrow, which, though I had not known my young cousins, was deep and true. I wrote to little Susan Hurst's lover, asking him to take up his abode at my farm, and manage it during my absence, which would very likely be of some duration, as my Uncle, who had been an exile during the greater part of his life, wanted me to put him in the way of becoming a good practical Northern Farmer. If he could persuade Miss Hurst's parents



and grandfather to shorten his period of probation, I would promise not to disturb their honeymoon.

I sent forward what luggage I required, besides what I could carry with me on the journey; and I was up and away before the sun rose above the birch-trees. Marguerite and Blanche, Lord Maskelyne and the fair English youth, were no doubt asleep when I started. I was certain that the tall young fellow riding beside Blanche across the Moors was a south-countryman. "Frank" was no Scottish name. I had no wish to see him nearer, nor to do the honours of my humble home to Marguerite's English suitor. No doubt I was very rash—very inconsiderate—men deeply in love generally are so; nor does it ever occur to them that mortal man can be so blind to the charms which have enslaved them for ever as to prefer another woman.

I did not leave any message with the widow for any chance visitors. I think she expected that the young ladies might call, for she mentioned that Stonelands Farm was again occupied, this time by a larger party. She believed that Lord Maskelyne had come there, instead of to the Hall; which, indeed, was scarcely in a condition to receive company. Some different arrangements had been made, she believed, in consequence of one of the young ladies being engaged to be married. It was the first time His Lordship had ever stayed in the same house with them; but, sure, he was an older man now, and steadier, and his sister, the Countess,



was with them; a widow lady, which made things look more correct, and altogether pleasanter for all parties. Family disagreements ought not to last for ever.

I had not attended much at the time to the woman's discursive remarks; but they returned to my mind, as objects seen at a moment of mental perturbation often do very vividly, when I was crossing the waste, and the path to Stonelands lay marked in grey slabs of stone over the Moors. The road was dazzlingly white in the morning sunshine; all the storm-clouds, as I anticipated, had cleared off: but the track I had followed with the French sisters lay grey and cool across the dewy turf, and the verandah of the cottage, and thatched roofs of the farm-buildings at the back, were all in deep shadow. It was too early to fear encountering anyone, and I could not help going as far as the wall where Marguerite had plucked the forget-me-not, and left it in my hand. The time was not come for the tiny flowerets to expand. At present, she could not find one for my favoured rival. I ground down into the turf with the heel of my strong boot the only tuft that was even venturing to come into bud and leaf.

After this boyish ebullition of temper, I felt ashamed of myself, and wished I could have resuscitated the poor crushed flower, but it was too late. I went back to the road, sobered, and, if still saddened, not altogether hopeless. Words



and looks of Marguerite's, as we stood by the stepping-stones, came back to my mind, which almost gave the lie to her imputed infidelity; for she had given me, in times gone by, hopes that I felt still I could not entirely relinquish. I did not believe Mrs. Brand's gossip about a wedding. Those kind of people were always thinking of matrimony. If Marguerite's fate had indeed been completely settled, her looks and manner to me would have been different.

When I got thus far I dismissed the subject from my mind, which reverted to our family troubles. I was sincerely grieved about my young cousins, and I sympathised strongly with their father and sister. The very name of Jessie had an attraction in its sound, drawing my love to the puir lone lassie with whom I was so closely connected, who would be to me as a sister. Her father said at the end of his letter that he wished me, Jessica's boy, to be as a son to him, and a brother to his motherless girl. We two were all he had now to comfort him.

I resolved that he should not be disappointed in his expectations, and that I would act towards him with such loyalty and affection as my Aunt would have wished me to feel and show to her and my own nearest kindred. I honoured him for the industry and self-denial, practised by many a thrifty Scot, abroad and at home, which had enabled him to put by siller, and add pund to pund, in the



far-off hope of redeeming part of the family property. Still more I felt for him when I thought of the deep disappointment, the heart-crushing sorrow, with which he must have followed his two young sons to their grave in the stranger's land.

A rainbow spanned the Border-land—one foot in Scotland, one on English ground—when I crossed it, and for the first time saw the native country of my ancestors. The Border hill seemed to separate one part of my existence from another, just as it parted the grey Northumbrian Mosses and Moors from the rounded hills, dark woods, and gentle slopes, declining into a more cultivated region.

The heath was not in flower, and gleaming rays of spring sunshine, alternating with swift showers, were passing over the long lines of pale blue hills in the distance—north of Tweed.

I did not wish to arrive late at my Uncle's house—tired and spent after the shock of his letter, and a long journey on foot; so I put up at a little inn, near a famous abbey, which I visited again by moonlight, not being satisfied with my first hasty inspection. It is not only Melrose which should be visited at the witching midnight hour. All our great ruined Fanes look best without the garish light of day, and the sight of those grand ivied walls and crumbling mementoes of past scenes did me good to look upon; and, by reminding me of my own insignificance, prepared me,



worthily and faithfully to fulfil whatever part in life might hereafter be laid upon me.

I thought of the Demon Mariner and the lady, as I gazed on those faint waving hills on the horizon; and repeated dreamily to myself some lines I had learnt out of one of the old ballads in the "Poetry books" over which Aunt Jessica had warned me not to waste too much time:

"O! what hills are yon, yon pleasant hills

That the sun shines sweetly on?

'O! yon are the Hills of Heaven,' he said,

'Where you will never win.'"

It should not be my fault, nor would I waste time and opportunities in the new years and life that lay before me in the goodly land beneath those heavenly-looking hills, if I did not gain the summits good men may, according to the Poet, reach in time.

Annt Jessica, if she might look down upon him, should not be ashamed of her boy—even if he could not make himself worthy of a place in the heart of the only other woman now on earth whose favour seemed worth winning.

The rainbow, under which, according to some superstitious peasants' fancies, it is unlucky to walk, had long since faded away; but my hopes grew bright, and my heart lighter, as I crossed the hills of the Border, and, leaving the little hostelry which had sheltered me for the night, descended into the cultivated Scottish Lowlands.



## CHAPTER XIV.

"Build on no to-morrow,  
Love has but to-day,  
If the links seem slackening  
Cut the bond away.

"Trust no prayer or promise;  
Words are grains of sand:  
To keep your heart unbroken,  
Hold it in your hand."

A. A. PROCTOR.

CARTER FELL, or, as it is more commonly called, the Border Hill, lay behind me still wreathed in mist and backed by storm-clouds; but a burn, which reminded me of the brook under the birch-trees, wimpled along in light and sunshine past the great Abbey and through a richly cultivated district. I followed its windings without stopping to ask questions, sometimes descending to its brink, at others keeping high up on its wooded banks. Through lanes and fields and woods, past hall and cottage, rick and mill, it brought me through a pleasant country almost to my Uncle's door.



At each step I formed new, perhaps good, resolutions; but, like most novelties, there was a flaw in some of them. I resolved in this new country to become a new man and to lead a new life. I wished to cast off old weaknesses and to be free from clinging regrets—to wander, like the burn, whither I liked, in fresh spring sunshine; making fresh connections and raising a fresh crop of healthy desires and prospects—to abjure all fanciful, unsuitable dreams. Only I reckoned a little without my host. All the time I was resolving to forget Marguerite I carried her sweet image in my heart—just as the brook, rippling in light, mirrored faithfully the same or similar blue skies and overhanging woodland boughs which had smiled upon and shadowed its course from the time when it first gushed from its spring in the hillside.

I seemed instinctively to know the grey, tall, slated house where my Scottish forebears had lived and died in days gone by. It rose against the budding fence of a birch-wood, through which, almost as it did at home, the brook flowed. Low hills came down in front, clothed with wood to the loch-side—a wide, tranquil expanse of inland water, which reflected, undisturbed, the blue of heaven, and white flecks of clouds passing over it. The house was ancient, with a dark tower rising out of low buildings near it—one of the Border fastnesses, but now lacking little for its security.



Not a lofty, not even a picturesque or romantic abode, yet with a kind of old-world beauty and serenity hanging about its homeliness.

I stood still for at least ten minutes, gazing upon it, and wondering what its inmates might be like, and how we should suit each other, before I could make up my mind to cross the threshold. Then I walked on quickly, lifting sharply the gate-latch and scarcely looking round.

Aunt Jessica was in my thoughts, even before I saw a tall man of strong build, her very image, standing in the doorway, and a wild moorland flower, clinging and delicate as the jessamine on a cottage-porch, close beside him.

I had been hourly expected, and my room was ready, were the first words uttered by my Uncle, as he welcomed me kindly and heartily. Jessie did not speak, but embraced me as a cousin; lifting shy blue eyes for one instant only, to meet my inquiring glances.

Well, I had never had a sister, but here was one ready made and provided for me. I felt that I could love and protect her; and in her timid glance I fancied that I read trust in the promise my heart readily accorded.

Uncle George seemed satisfied with my greeting. A momentary spasm of emotion shot across his face, which, he told me afterwards, was caused by my likeness to his dead boys: but, Scottish fashion, he said nothing about his own feelings, and gave



me, whatever it cost him, the reception of a kind father.

After my lonely childhood and secluded youth, it seemed strange to find myself suddenly adopted a member of this quiet household. But from the first hour I felt quite at home at Birklands. My Uncle treated me like a son, and Jessie had won at the first glance a sister's place in my heart. Poor lassie! she was very lone and sad before I came, in her strange new home; missing her young brothers at every step, and almost entirely unacquainted with her neighbours as well as with the ways of the country.

I soon found that I could be of much use to my Uncle, and in my turn I learnt a great deal from him. He had battled with the world, and won experience in its ways which I lacked; but he did not know as well as I did how to contend with the difficulties which beset a small farmer settling on rough land only partially cultivated. The soil was more fertile than that on the borders of the Moor, and my Uncle had more capital to lay out, which I was able to teach him how to turn to the best advantage. The first weeks that I spent with him were very busy ones, and we soon became not mere kinsfolk, but fast friends.

I was surprised to find, when I knew the country a little better, that I was not out of the reach of old memories. The world is very small; and, after all said and done, I had but crossed



the Border, and could not expect that I should have left my former life behind me. I felt inclined to laugh when I discovered that the Model Farm, where Lord Maskelyne had offered to send me to study the new system practised there, lay on the other side of the brook. His meadows sloped gently down to it, and the large mansion I had passed on my way belonged to him in right of his mother. It was occupied by his steward, and several young English gentlemen had come there: my Uncle said, to learn farming. I did not lessen the respect with which he looked upon me as his assistant and instructor in the goodly art, by telling him that I had been invited to be a pupil in the science of agriculture and chemistry combined, which was doing such wonders for His Lordship's crops and cattle.

Jessie told me, when I happened to mention that Lord Maskelyne was a neighbour of mine in England, that he seldom came to visit this estate. The steward's wife was her only acquaintance, and had been more kind and civil than the Scottish folk round about; who were, the girl said with a sigh, less than friendly. Her father checked her, saying it was her own fault—she held her head too high—people were afraid of her. The colour went and came in her face at his chiding, though it was gentle enough. Sorrow had shaken her sorely, and she was naturally a very sensitive plant.

After Uncle George had left the room his



daughter returned to the subject, seeming to dwell on it with more interest than she usually displayed in the surroundings of her new home. Mrs. Kennedy, she said, was English, and had been governess in a family of distinction. She was musical, and they often practised duets, vocal and instrumental, together. It was a treat to play on the grand pianoforte in the drawing-room at the Hall, as she had none at home just yet. Jessie was fond of reading, and the steward's wife lent her books from my Lord's library. She did not know what she should have done without these amusements. The Hall was a lovely place. She would like me to see it, and to walk there with her the first day I could find time. It was a wonder its owners did not care more for it.

I could not help thinking that this indifference was rather a good thing. Lord Maskelyne's gay friends might have been as unsafe neighbours for our pretty clinging plant as he himself had proved for our much stronger-minded Aunt. Mrs. Kennedy and her sensible, straightforward spouse, with whom I soon became acquainted, and who gave me many useful hints about farming, were much more suitable friends for the lonely girl at Birklands. They were alone at present, but were expecting the return of a pupil who would, the farmer thought, do him credit. He was never tired of talking of the proficiency of this youth,



and, as is often the case, I took a prejudice against him, being weary of hearing his praises.

One afternoon, when I was coming home through the birch-wood, I heard the notes of a key-bugle coming across the loch, and paused to listen to the air of an old Scotch ballad which my Aunt used to sing to me when I was a boy. It died away before I reached the house, but Jessie was sitting at her work by the open window, and I asked her if she had been listening to the music coming so sweetly off the water.

She lifted her head when I spoke, and the swift blushes which always accompanied the very slightest exertion dyed her cheeks, as she said hurriedly, "No; she had not been listening; she was thinking of something else;" and abruptly closed the window. Uncle George came in whilst we were talking together, and began telling me of some contemplated improvements in our mode of dressing the land, which had been suggested by that clever young chap who was stopping with Kennedy. He was getting to be a better farmer than the old fellow, who said he had taught him all he knew, and that he supposed he would soon be setting up for himself. He was well qualified for managing a farm—his own or any other gentleman's estate.

I saw our Lowland flower lift her fair head and listen with a prouder, happier gleam than I had ever seen in her soft eyes before. Though I



was not her lover, I felt horribly jealous. Jessie was like a sister, and I could not bear the thought of losing one so recently bestowed on me by Providence. I sincerely hoped that this promising student might speedily be taken out of her way, before harm came of his proximity. Ignorant as I was of the world, I yet knew that his was likely to be a mere passing fancy—engendered by idleness and opportunity—whilst, with the fair secluded lassie by the loch-side, the root of first-love might strike deeper, and be severed only at the cost of tearing up the tender floweret.

That same evening I encountered Jessie coming back from the Hall with a book in her hand, which she was reading so intently that she did not hear my footsteps till I was close upon her. The volume was a small selection from Shelley, and she was reading with lips apart, which unconsciously uttered a line aloud the description of the sensitive plant to which I have since often mentally compared her.

"Who gave you that book, Jessie?" I said, taking it from her hand, which trembled excessively, and was not altogether unresisting. "I do not think you ought to read poetry often and indiscriminately. Was it your friend at the Hall?"

"Yes," she said, artlessly. "*He* told me it was a very nice selection from Shelley's poems."

"I did not know that you had any friend at the Hall but Mrs. Kennedy," I said, not giving



back the book, though she held out her hand for it. "No, I shall look this over before you read any more. I do not feel inclined to trust *your friend* implicitly."

"Indeed you are quite wrong," said Jessie, colouring. "Mr. Frank is very particular. I am quite sure he would not lend me any book which I ought not to read."

I remembered with a rush of jealous emotion Blanche's innocent admission that Marguerite and "Frank" were sure to be together, and likely to be talking nonsense. Was this the fair-haired lover who had ridden across the Moor, under my very eyes, to claim her from me at the stepping-stones, whom I had left my home to avoid, and was he now perverting the mind of our little Moorland lassie with idle flatteries and meaningless attentions? Combined with this were the recollections of my Aunt's songbook, with its inscription—"From Bertie to Jessie." Though Jessie looked ready to cry with vexation, I held fast my prize.

"I shall either take this book to your father, or to your friend at the Hall," I said, cruelly. "Choose which it shall be."

Jessie did not answer immediately. Then she lifted her fair face proudly, and said:

"You may give it to my father. I have no secrets from him. He knows and likes Mr. Ducie



better than you do; and I am sure he will admire the poems."

I felt rebuked, but still I was very uneasy.

"Jessie," I said, "I am not sure that your father or, what is of yet more consequence, that you know—I had not recognised him till you mentioned his Christian name—as much of Mr. Ducie as I do. The first time—the only time, indeed—that I saw him; and I sincerely wish it may be the last, for I do not like or trust him—he was paying a great deal of attention to a young lady in England, a connection of Lord Maskelyne's. Will you let me give him back this book, and allow me as your cousin—your brother to make some further inquiries before you increase this unwise intimacy?"

"No," she said, coldly; "I am perfectly satisfied. You may, if you like, give the book to my father, and tell him all you surmise or know on the subject. But I will not have my name mentioned to Mr. Ducie by a young man like yourself."

I put the book back in her hand, unwilling to appear a busybody and a marplot.

"You must be guided by your own good sense, then, in this matter, Jessie," I said, gravely. "I do not wish to bring you into trouble with my uncle. He will be your best adviser if you tell him the whole truth. Only remember if you at any moment stand in need of a friend—a brother—I shall be always at your service."



Jessie put her soft white hand in mine. It was like a lady's, for she was not in the habit of doing a stroke of work, which perhaps was none the better for her.

"I thank you, Harry," she said, earnestly. "If I want a kind friend, a trusty adviser, a good right hand—now my own brothers are no longer able to protect their little sister—I will not forget your promise."

She ran up the steps into the garden with tears in her eyes, and vanished inside the old grey house.



## CHAPTER XV.

"An early worshipper at Nature's shrine,  
I loved her rudest scenes—warrens, and heaths,  
And yellow commons and birch-shaded hollows,  
And hedgerows bordering unfrequented lanes  
Bowered with wild roses, and the clasping woodbine.  
Where purple tassels of the tangling vetch  
With bittersweet and bryony interweave."

CHARLOTTE SMITH.

"What's the best thing in the world?  
June-rose, by May-dew impearled;  
Sweet south-wind that means no rain;  
Pleasure not to haste to end;  
Memory that gives no pain;  
Love, when *so* you're loved again.  
What's the best thing in the world?  
—Something out of it, I think."

E. B. BROWNING.

I LEARNT more after that evening, without compromising Jessie, than I had previously cared to ascertain either from Mr. Kennedy or my Uncle, respecting the young Englishman who had been staying at intervals during the last twelve months at Craigie Hall. He was only a distant connection



of Lord Maskelyne's, but from some of his passing remarks the shrewd bailiff augured that a nearer relationship might be in prospect. The young man had acted at one time as his Lordship's secretary, and had accompanied him and the young ladies abroad, making one of the family during the past winter spent in Italy.

He had lately succeeded to a considerable property in a southern English county, and talked of settling down. It was no affair of mine; and I did not enlighten Kennedy farther as to the relationship between his future bride and Lord Maskelyne when he spoke of her as his daughter. Perhaps Marguerite, now that she had adopted other ties, might have resigned her proud reluctance to share the advantages which the old gardener had said were at her disposal. She and Blanche might be going, as he said, to share and share alike in his favour, as sisters instead of cousins.

It was quite impossible that I should form any intimacy with this gay callant. We were not men of the same way of thinking; and Frank Ducie had crossed my path, as well as my young cousin's, disastrously for us both.

When we met in the fields, or occasionally at my Uncle's—it was but rarely, for he did not often cross the threshold of Birklands, and I never during his stay there visited the Hall—we had few ideas in common. One thing I rejoiced at. Either from too much or too little sensibility, the



young man never mentioned Marguerite's name; though he often spoke about Lord Maskelyne, and the pleasant winter months spent in Italy with him and the ladies of his family.

Mrs. Kennedy was very curious on this subject, as women of her class usually are respecting persons of higher rank; but Mr. Ducie showed more discretion than I felt inclined to give him credit for possessing. All his travelling anecdotes related to expeditions which he had taken with Lord Maskelyne, whose great kindness was dwelt upon with never-failing gratitude. One day he mentioned, in speaking of his ascent of one of the beautiful mountain ranges near the Lake of Albano, that the exertions required had greatly fatigued the lady who accompanied them; but I discovered, rather to my surprise, that it was Blanche who had shared their pleasant expedition.

I can scarcely account now for the pertinacity with which, in spite of Ducie's silence and Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy's loquacity, I held fast the opinion that it *must* be Marguerite who was the object of the young Englishman's attachment. It is, I think, a peculiarity of lovers that the one person who attracts their admiration must be the loadstone which draws to itself every other man's desires. Beautiful as I acknowledged Blanche to be, more regularly perfect features, a fairer complexion, more bewitching softness than her cousin might to others seem endowed with, there had always been



a soul wanting to animate her lovely form and face. Excepting during the sad hours when ill-health etherealised her fragile frame and she had looked more like an angel than a woman, though I had been deeply sorry for her, the poor young girl had never interested me as her unselfish, noble-minded sister had done from the first moment when her voice summoned me to her side across the misty Moorland.

It seemed quite impossible—it never even entered into my mind—that any man free to choose could pass by Marguerite and give his heart to Blanche. Besides this conviction, had not the two laughing girls in the kitchen at the Inn said that Marguerite and Frank had braved the storm to linger together at the Haggisthorn—the place sacred to the memory of our first meeting! It was but a part of her character that after the first hour spent with her lover—shielded, no doubt, tenderly by him from rain and wind—she had recollected Blanche, and sent their young protector to see how she had fared during the tempest; just as she, though usually strong and able and passionately fond of the beauties of nature, had disinterestedly given up the pleasure to her poor little cousin-sister, of exploring the beauties of the Alban Lake.

My own manifold disadvantages were painfully apparent to me when I heard Frank Ducie speak of his travels in many lands—especially in classic Italy. No one, he said, could be a better guide



than Lord Maskelyne, and he appeared to have profited by his companionship. His own education had been completed 'at the best of the English Universities, where he had borne away high honours, and supplemented by visiting scenes which I too longed to behold, but scarcely felt able to appreciate as fully as this polished scholar and fastidious critic. Of course he was somewhat out of his element in the society of Northern farmers; but I must say, that with all his learning and accomplishments, Frank Ducie was a manly fellow. I scarcely wondered at the admiration with which Mrs. Kennedy and Jessie listened to his stories of adventure, and lays of many lands, one evening when he walked up with his host and hostess to Birklands, and my Uncle persuaded them to stay for supper. When it was concluded he bade Jessie fetch her hat and cloak, and we all strolled by the lake-side, and along the deep-banked fir-crowned lanes, nearly to the gates of Craigie Hall.

I had started off alone the next day for a long walk, following the windings of the river, which in some places murmured placidly through the smiling cultivated fields; then suddenly with a sharper course plunged into the shadows of wooded heights, from which a picturesque fanciful bridge had been flung across the stream. It was not altogether a pleasant surprise when I was suddenly hailed from the bridge by the young man whom I had pertinaciously avoided on most occasions, and



who had certainly, the previous evening, displayed his varied powers of conversation, as far as I was concerned, uselessly. Frank Ducie, the next moment, had made his way down the precipitous hillside, and challenged me to be his companion in an afternoon ramble.

Though I should greatly have preferred solitude, I had no reasonable excuse to offer: and we walked on briskly towards a memorial fountain, which afforded us a cooling drink, and through the varied scenery of the valley, where the river winds past.

“Oh, softly, Jed! thy sylvan current lead  
Round every hazel copse and smiling mead,  
Where lines of fir the glowing landscape screen,  
And crown the heights with tufts of deeper green.”

My misanthropical humour did not long resist the influences of the summer breeze and verdant landscape, to say nothing of my companion's genial mood; and ere long we were treading the romantic winding road together, on more intimate terms than I had ever fancied could exist between us. Lord Maskelyne had written, he said, urging him to take advantage of my being his neighbour, and recommending him to make a friend of me; and it should not be his fault if he did not follow such excellent advice.

I fancied, as he glanced at me smilingly, that young Ducie was aware that I had rather avoided his society. Perhaps it stimulated him to overcome whatever barrier intervened; for I am sure he was not accustomed to have any overtures he



might choose to make, slighted. I might be the only heretic disinclined to bow down before his accomplishments and fascinations; and for that reason, like a vain woman who cares most for the homage of an unwilling suitor, this gay young Lothario might be resolved to conquer my obdurate shyness.

Be that as it may, he exerted himself frankly and pleasantly to win me over, and to a certain extent succeeded. It was pleasant enough to follow the windings of the rippling current with an agreeable companion, fully alive to all the associations connected with the Border-land, so long familiar to me in song and story, that *there* I felt I could meet the travelled scholar not at a disadvantage.

This incipient cordiality lasted until Frank Ducie, dropping the general topics on which we had at first dwelt, seemed disposed to take me into his confidence. I thought him rather arrogant and self-sufficient, though my Uncle and Kennedy had said the same thing before—when he told me that he felt persuaded he had learned all that the shrewd and experienced Scotch bailiff could teach him; and that he meant now to begin farming on a large scale on his own land, and among his own people, in Hampshire.

I could not help asking if he thought theoretical knowledge would bear the test of wind and weather. Kennedy learned more by experience, I



fancied, than from books. It was seldom that gentlemen-farmers found the experiments which looked well on paper and in favourable seasons profitable in the long-run.

"Well, I must take my chance," the young man said, colouring a little. "I see you have not much faith in me; but the fact is, I want to settle down in my own county. I dare say I shall not make my fortune by farming, but it will be a pursuit and an occupation. Meanwhile, my place here will be vacant. Would it suit you, who have had experience, but confess to being a little behindhand in theory, to step into it? Lord Maskelyne has commissioned me to ask you the question."

My thoughts went back to the day when I had first declined Lord Maskelyne's proposal, even though it was coupled with the hope that accepting it might bring me nearer to Marguerite. I felt indignant with her young and, as I believed, favoured lover, for daring to bring the idea forward again, and said tersely:

"No, it would not suit me. I am too old to go to school again."

Frank Ducie looked at me with a saucy smile.

"I don't see the grey hairs yet, Forbes. In point of age, I do not believe there is much difference between us. I am old enough to think it time to settle down in the country—even to marry."

"Very possibly," I answered, drily. "There



is no age at which such dreams do not come. I had mine early, and have outlived them. I shall never marry, and, consequently, care little about making a fortune. Such a farm as mine is scarcely worth experimenting upon, and would not maintain a family. Most likely I shall go to America, and sell my paternal acres."

"Ah!" said Frank, sarcastically. "Sits the wind in that quarter! Trust me, it will veer right round presently."

"Pardon me if I differ from you," I said, stiffly. "The wind that affects my fortune has blown steadily from an adverse quarter for some time. I have no faith in sudden changes, and have nothing of the weather-cock about me. I am only a sturdy, uncultivated Northumbrian farmer."

Frank Ducie's face flushed, and he walked on for some time, slowly and in silence.

"Mr. Forbes," he said at last, gravely and more respectfully, "it was not my intention to offend you; far from it. One whom I esteem, nay, reverence—the most unselfish, the most noble-minded woman I have ever seen—taught me your worth, and bade me try to win your regard—if I could. I have hitherto signally failed, but I shall not yet relinquish the effort. I see you are bored, so I will cut across yonder fields and leave you to your own meditations; and I hope when I have released you from the *gêne* of my unwelcome



companionship, you will give a more favourable consideration to Lord Maskelyne's proposal."

His good-humour fairly conquered my sullenness, and we walked back amicably enough together; but though I believe he really and sincerely desired to make a friend of me, I resolutely shunned being made the confidant of his impending prosperous fortune. It was to me yet more aggravating when he suddenly changed the conversation, and launched forth into the wildest praise of poor little Mademoiselle Blanche.

Some half-compassionate, interjectional remark of mine made him quite angry. His fair face darkened, and he seemed for the first time in danger of losing his temper. She was, he said, as clever as she was beautiful; not, certainly, one of the strong-minded Women's Rights champions of the day, but the dearest, the most lovable of her sex.

Again he walked on in silence till we reached the corner of the Birch-wood, through which lay my nearest road home. It was strange that our nearest approach to a quarrel should, after all, I thought, be about a person comparatively indifferent to us both; but I supposed that, in his heart, which I believed to be a kind one, as in my own, lay hid a very tender, reverential compassion for the fair woman who had won a soul through suffering.

I did not see much more of the young man after this rather abortive attempt on his part at



making a friend of me; but Mr. Kennedy mentioned, in a more business-like manner, Lord Maskelyne's wish to aid me in acquiring more scientific knowledge of modern farming. I went over the model buildings, and from time to time visited the newly-cultivated land, learning a good deal, but without constituting myself his pupil.

Frank Ducie seemed absorbed in preparations for leaving the Hall; and I trusted that he had not time or inclination for seeking opportunities to ingratiate himself farther with our modest flower at Birklands. I never saw them together after that moonlight stroll by the loch-side, nor did I hear music floating over its waters half so often.

A week of wet and windy weather set in, during which Jessie, having caught a severe cold, was confined to her room. When she came downstairs at last, I saw that her father looked at her anxiously; and I too perceived a greater change than the indisposition from which she had suffered ought to have occasioned: but she made no complaint.

When Mrs. Kennedy proposed that she should go to the Hall for a change, as they were now quite alone and she could be as quiet as she liked, Jessie shrank from the proposition; saying that she would rather bide at home; adding truly, that father and Cousin Harry would be lonely without her.



## CHAPTER XVI.

"Though the doom of swift decay  
Shocks the soul, when life is strong—  
Though, for frailer hearts, the day  
Lingers sad and overlong;—  
Still the weight will find a leaven,  
Still the spoiler's hand is slow,  
While the future has its heaven,  
And the past, its long ago."

LORD HOUGHTON.

WHEN I looked back to the desolate Moorland region I had lately crossed, from the peaceful smiling banks of the Scottish lowland loch, and the gentle river with its red scaurs and banks crowned by dark tufts of fir, it seemed difficult to realise that so short a time and space divided me from the happy hours at Stonelands, and the hopes which there brightened my life. Well, I had outlived the shock and weathered the storm on the Moor which had laid low those bright expectations. I was a man, and must bear to meet with bitter disappointment. Had not my good, brave Uncle borne patiently the loss of his



bonnie lads? We were not like the delicate girl we both watched narrowly, who seemed fading away under our anxious eyes.

Jessie did not, at the first, give me her confidence. We had not known each other long enough. Neither, I think, did she bestow it on her father; but we both knew that something had gone wrong with our bit lassie. She took no more long walks, nor did she sit at the open window looking over the loch, or listening to any sound coming across the water. The wind was easterly she said, and chilled her—though to us it seemed full of May sweetness. She sat still by the fire which her father bade the maidens light for her, busy with her seam—her white work, which always looked to me like a shroud and made me shiver. Each day she seemed to grow quieter and paler in her silent grief; but she made neither complaint nor struggle—only just sat there patiently, bearing it as best she might.

"It's just sorrowing for the puir lads she is, my bonnie maid. They were always together. It's not likely she should get over the loss easily," said her father, easing his pent-up feelings with a sigh which was almost a groan; one afternoon when even Jessie's patience seemed to fail her under his sorrowful gaze, which expressed more than he intended to show, and she suddenly gathered up her work and left the room. "It's a different life altogether from what she led in the



States, and I doubt its suiting her as well. There were more young folk about her, and an altogether freer way of getting along. If I see her droop lower I'll take her back again, and make you a present of the farm. She's the only thing on earth I have to care for, except yourself, Harry, and I wish you had taken a fancy to each other; but neither of ye seem minded that fashion, as I hoped might have fallen out."

Uncle George paused; but as I had no encouragement to give to the idea he had thrown out, which would not have suited either Jessie or myself, he went on, with another sigh:

"That's as God pleases. He makes us some after one pattern, some after another, and He alone knows which sort will fit in with its fellow. I'm no matchmaker nor marplot. If Jessie and you had been so minded, it would have given me pleasure; but ye'll neither of ye hear another word from my lips on that head, since ye don't foregather. There's nothing so unaccountable as human creatures' likings and dislikings. Do you think, Harry, she has any other fancy? I'd give all I'm worth to make her happy if I knew how; and sure I am, I'll go to my grave soon if the one living thing I care for, to see growing up beside me and brightening the old house, fades away the gate she's doing now before my eyes."

He got up and went to the window, where he stood looking out; but I believe his eyes,



unaccustomed as the dour Scot was to shedding them, even in bitterest sorrow, were blinded by tears. I said the first words of comfort which I could think of, and they seemed to cheer him; though I think it was more from the deep sympathy between us than from any real consolation which they contained.

That evening, in the gloaming, I came suddenly upon our poor maid. She was sitting in a little cove formed by the red sandstone, and arched over with a budding briar, watching the sunshine on the loch, just as, like herself, it was beginning to lose its rosiness.

"It's warmer here than by the fireside, Harry," she said, while a glow stole over her face, either from embarrassment or the reflection of the red sunset. "And, oh, I can't bear to see father's pitiful looks. Oh, do ask him not to watch me so! I do all I can to hide sorrow, but I can't help his seeing it."

I sat down beside her under the bank, where, indeed, as she said, it was very warm and pleasant.

"Are you quite certain you do all you can for that good man, Jessie?" I said, earnestly. "I don't mean about hiding whatever grief God has been pleased to lay on you. Sometimes I think it is best and kindest to make on open breast of it; though I am not one that likes talking about one's feelings. But it's the silent dropping that wears the stone; and that's not it, for you're none



so hard—it's the lone stillness of the heart that kills. Would it not be better, when you see two men who care for nothing but your happiness, to make friends of one or both of us, and let us help you through the long lane? Perhaps it may have a turning sooner than you expect."

I do not know what there was in my homely proverb which touched her, but Jessie burst into tears. I thought the outburst of long-suppressed emotion would not harm her, and did not say another word.

"I'm better for crying," she said, after a few minutes. "But oh, Harry, I'm afraid there's no turning of my dark lane; and I'm so young. I shudder to see it leading down into the deeps. Sometimes I can't help thinking that I'm going to follow my poor brothers, and it's death I'm nearing!" she said, trembling and laying her little hand in mine, as if for a warm living touch to dispel her terror. "I can't eat or sleep, and I get weaker day by day; and yet I try not to grieve, and I *am* sorry for poor father. Oh, what will he do without me?"

"Uncle George has just been telling me that he will not suffer long if you quit him. A man's grief is not noisy, but it is slow and sure; and, by the look in his face just now, I know that there are bounds to his patient endurance, Jessie. While we are impetuously murmuring because some good thing we wish is denied us, and yet



we have health and strength—sight, hearing, powers of mind and body, only impaired by our own wilful selfishness—the brave old hearts nearest to us are often breaking—the dimmed eyes that can shed no more tears are aching wearily, whilst they watch the fitful flutter of our impassioned rebellious strivings—the tired limbs that long for rest are kept from it by anxiety for our welfare. Last night I heard your father go twice to your door, and you were ever pacing to and fro, and greeting. Do you think he got any sleep the night?”

Jessie started.

“Oh, Harry, did you and father hear me weeping? I had a bad time after I left you both, but I fell asleep afterwards; sooner, perhaps, than my poor kind father, and he does need rest. All the time my poor brothers were ill, after he sent me away out of danger of infection, the people told me he watched night and day beside them. He has never been the same hale strong man since—I’m feared he never will be again—but you don’t think I’m killing him?”

“As surely as if you put a knife in his heart, Jessie, grief for you is pulling him down. You slept sooner than he did last night, I’ll be bound; and so it is ever. Youth renews itself, and revives and strikes fresh root; but the old tree, if the sap fails, perishes. There is no second spring—no fresh life-juice—no revival. Now, think it over. You have met with some keen, soul-piercing grief.



No one can feel more for you than I do; for hopes which were green with me last summer have withered like last year's foliage; but we are both young and strong. Duties we have, too; and, in time, if we perform them, pleasures: not those we expected, but such as God chooses us to have, may spring up in our life-path. Would it not be better to go along it bravely than to lie down under the thorn-hedge and perish?"

The glow of sunset had quite gone off the loch, and Jessie's sweet face was very pale as she looked up at me:

"Yes, Harry, you are right," she said, firmly. "It is better to bear our burden bravely than to sink by the way, and leave others to carry it home. I'll be a better girl for what you've said to me to-night. It's all over between me and the young stranger," she said, again blushing vividly — "if, indeed, there ever was anything between us; he scarcely seemed to think so. We've parted for ever, without even breaking a sixpence. You'll not have to take his books away; I sent them all back last week. Perhaps I was not the better for reading so much poetry and romance—though, indeed, I saw no harm in anything he ever lent to me, and I don't think he intended to make me suffer as I own I have done. It was just my own silly fancy. He's just possessed with his own bright prospects, and never thought a bit about me from the beginning to the end. I ought to



have known better. I did see what a foolish lassie I had been, when he sat here by my side, talking away about his own affairs, and never once minding what it cost me."

An entirely selfish pang shot through me as I listened. "He is gone now," I said bitterly, "and to better fortunes than he has left behind him."

"Yes; he has gone across the Border to marry a lady to whom he has been engaged for nearly a year," said Jessie, while a faint, sad smile quivered round her mouth. "Oh, Harry! could you believe that I had courage to wish him good luck with his English bride, and to ask if she was very beautiful; and he said 'Yes,' and showed me a locket that hung to his watch-chain, which he had always worn. I thought, it was his mother's picture. A fair, sweet English maiden of high degree. What chance had I against her? I only wish he had told me sooner. And, oh, Harry! it was not all vanity. He *did* want me to like him; and he brought me books and gifts, and sang across the lake the songs I loved, and waited and watched for me; but it was mere idleness."

Jessie's voice broke down, and she wept silently.

Every tear she shed excited my indignation against the man who, blessed with the love of my peerless Marguerite, had turned aside to gather, and then throw away, this modest flower.

"He is not worth one tear. I pity the woman who has won his light love far more than the



girl who has lost it," I said, so vehemently that Jessie looked up deprecatingly. "Do not say a word in his defence; I am in no humour to bear it. The lady whom he was courting in England, not Lord Maskelyne's daughter, but his ward, is a thousand times too good for him! I have a great mind to enlighten her and her friends as to the mode in which he has passed his time when out of their sight."

"Oh no! I would not injure him for the world!" she exclaimed, breathlessly. "Oh, Harry! you must not betray my folly. All the time he was talking and telling me about her, though I knew he admired me and had sought my favour, I could see that he had not been in earnest; but I do think he loves *her*, and will make her happy. He had nothing to amuse him here, but just the talk with me by the lakeside, and he liked to hear what I thought of his books. Girls should take care of themselves, and not be led to think more than it deserves of such nonsense. I'll be the better of the lesson yet, you'll see, Harry; and thank him for it, perhaps, when we're older. Anyhow, I said truth when I wished him happiness; and when he's married, it would be sin to think any more about him. Tell father, please, that I'm better; and make him give me more work to do. I led a busier life at the farm over the water, and I think it's partly idleness that's killing me. We had the Bees, where cheerful lads and lassies met



and helped each other through their labours, and not so much waiting upon as he's given me since he thought I was not over-strong. You've cured me and I'll be brave and useful. God for ever bless you for the words you've said to-night, dear, good cousin Harry."

Jessie laid her fair cheek against mine, and kissed me in sweet cousinly fashion. Then she rose, and went along the path homewards, with a livelier step than had lately been her wont. I saw her father standing at the door as I followed her slowly, and that she threw herself into his arms and embraced him passionately. He led her at once indoors, for the night-wind was beginning to blow chilly over the lake.

I did not enter the house, but turned into the birch-wood, where I walked up and down for hours. It is easier, after all, to preach resignation than to practise it, and the crowning sorrow was to resign Marguerite to a lover who was, I believed, unworthy of her.

I fought a good fight under the shivering birch-leaves that night; but I am not sure, after all, that I came out of it as well as Jessie had done. The reed bends and lifts itself again, when the stubborn branch breaks and is rent off the parent stem. Besides this, I had no tender care for father or mother to make me regardless of self. I stood alone in the world, with what I had hoped might be my household divinities shattered in the



dust. So be it, since so it seemed good in wiser eyes—to a higher judgment than mine. But I could not submit, as I did before I went to rest, without feeling that it had cost me a harder struggle than little Jessie could have borne, to yield to the decree which must leave me for ever alone in my Moorland farm, and give my pearl among women to one whom I could not regard otherwise than with righteous indignation.



## CHAPTER XVII.

"She sat at work, and as the moon  
On Etna smiles, he smiled on me,  
But, now and then, in cheek and eyes,  
I saw, or fancied, such a glow  
As when, in summer-evening skies,  
Some say, 'It lightens;' some say, 'No.'

"She loves with love that cannot tire,  
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,  
Through passionate duty love flames higher,  
As grass grows taller round a stone."

*The Angel in the House.*

THERE was a kind of passionate earnestness in the affection which Jessie wrapped round the stern old patriarch, like the tender clinging sprays which cluster at the base of grey boulders. Perhaps it was cruel of me to have opened her eyes to the fact that Uncle George was not so strong as he looked. Time and sorrow were telling upon him, and their effects had become more apparent in the last few days than in as many winters. Jessie's hectic flushes and sudden pallor never once unmarked, her faltering step and languid air had seriously



alarmed him. Her mother, he told me, had died of consumption, had been ailing before the birth of her last child, and he much feared that the disease might prove hereditary.

I do not think that he ever suspected Kennedy's handsome young pupil of having had any share in his darling's sudden loss of health and spirits. He rather attributed it to the loss of her brothers and the change of climate and mode of life. Jessie struggled bravely to recover her cheerfulness; and although hers was a constant nature not likely to change, she transferred the love, which could not at once be crushed, to a worthier object; and devoted herself, heart and soul, mind and body, to the task of consoling and reviving her father. She told me that until now he had scarcely ever spoken of his deep sorrow for his sons; but when he felt instinctively that they were drawn nearer to each other, he had laid aside his long habit of reserve, and spoken freely to her of their last hours. This expansion of feeling had done good to both father and daughter. Jessie did not feel so solitary now that the clinging tendrils of her sensitive nature had found interstices in the stone into which they could insert themselves.

My being compelled at this time to leave the father and daughter entirely alone for a week, as I expected when I left them, did more good than harm. Susan Hurst's lover claimed the fulfilment of a promise I had rashly made to be his



best-man, and I had to attend their wedding. When I went afterwards to my own house, where they were, in accordance with another engagement of mine, to spend the latter part of their honeymoon, I found Mrs. Brand full of perplexities about the reception of the bride; and of wishes that, instead of having to make the place ready for those young people, I was coming back to it myself. Her cares were soon set at rest, and I assured her that ere long I should return and settle at home for good.

A great load was taken off my mind by certain facts with which my good friends and neighbours made me acquainted. Of course everyone but myself had known all along that it was not my daisy, my pearl, my precious Marguerite, who was engaged to marry Frank Ducie, but dear little Mademoiselle Blanche. He had fallen in love with her when they were in Italy, and they appeared to be admirably fitted for each other, and had been as happy as possible during the time they spent at Stonelands; but after the journey to London, where the wedding was to take place very quietly, in prospect of the approaching separation from Marguerite and her father, the bonnie bride-elect began to droop; and fears were entertained that her lungs were affected. Nothing would satisfy her except returning to the old farm in Normandy; and the medical adviser who understood her constitution best, strongly recommended



that her friends should fall in with her humour, and try the effect of her native air. Marguerite, from whom she could not bear to be for the first time in their lives separated, had willingly given up her own plans to accompany her delicate adopted sister. Arrangements had been hastily made for their reception at the farm near Les Collines, and Blanche had already derived considerable benefit from this judicious compliance with her wishes.

On the corner of my mantel-shelf I found, awaiting my return, a note from Marguerite herself. She could not help, she said, writing to tell me how truly she and Blanche sympathised in the family sorrow which had taken me so suddenly away from my home. They had ridden over to see me, and been much disappointed by finding the place empty. She feared that I had formed some mistaken impressions respecting dear Frank, who was now like a brother to her, and Blanche's betrothed husband. Some day in the future, Marguerite trusted, we might meet again. Her own home, when freed from attendance on her sister, who still seemed unable to do without her, would be with Lord Maskelyne's widowed sister, now Dowager Countess of Nairn. This kind lady had taken a great fancy to her, and they had agreed to live together. Both were alone in the world, and needed companionship.

These were the plans which Blanche's sudden



illness and the postponement of her marriage had disturbed. They were together now, in Normandy; and the time of their return uncertain. Lord Maskelyne, with his future son-in-law, had sailed in his yacht to the Mediterranean. As for the widowed Countess, as Marguerite was not with her, I did not trouble myself to inquire where she was gone.

I did not remain long at my own home, but having given all necessary orders, left Mrs. Brand busily preparing it for the newly-married couple. The Manor Farm House would be ready for them, she said, in a few weeks; and the widow was determined to speed the parting guest much more heartily than she was inclined to welcome them on their arrival. Miss Susan was all very well, but she did hope I should soon be coming back myself to take possession. The rooms looked bright and pleasant in the sunny morning, and there were no storms on the Moor. The hills and vales wore the pure fresh colouring of early summer when I crossed the Border for the second time, on my return to Birklands, with a much lighter heart and brisker tread than when I had travelled over Carter Fell to attend Susan's wedding.

I only wished that I could have brought Jessie as good news as I had gathered during my absence. I saw her wistful glance when, in answer to my Uncle's question, I was forced to mention Lord Maskelyne, and the postponement of his daughter's marriage with Frank Ducie.



Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy, of course, knew the facts of the case, and had grieved over the tidings of his future bride's illness. They seemed to take a sincere interest in the young man who had dwelt so long under their roof, and to think nothing but good of him. Uncle George, too, had been much interested in his farming proficiency; and told me that he meant to have all the newest machinery, and scientific improvements carried out to a great extent on his English property. It would be a sad thing, he added with a sigh, if the energetic youth had an ailing wife to fetter him and cramp his genius.

"Oh, she'll be better, father," Jessie said, as his eyes rested, half unconsciously, upon her. "You see how much stronger I am since I took to getting up early, and seeing after the dairy, and drinking new milk, and curds and whey. I hope you think I look stronger, Harry?"

I complimented her sincerely—though it was but a poor, fleeting blush that brought the roses to her cheek.

Suddenly she said: "Was it the lady you saw him with in England that Mr. Ducie intended to marry? Somehow I thought, when you were telling father and Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy about her, that there had been a mistake. *You* look a great deal better, Harry, than when you went away—better and happier—quite a different person altogether."

Ah! Jessie! when was a pure woman's quick



instinct ever at fault? She had read me through like a book.

"No, it was not the same," I said, "only one nearly related to her. You were right, Jessie—it *was* the Laird's daughter to whom Mr. Ducie was engaged. Her cousin and adopted sister, now nursing her, is the person I mentioned once to you. She is going to live in future with Lord Maskelyne's sister, the widowed Countess of Nairn."

Neither Jessie nor her father spoke. I looked at her, and saw that, in spite of her cheerful bearing, she had become pale, and her eyes were full of tears. Uncle George, however, heaved the deepest sigh, as he suddenly left us.

Jessie could not restrain her tears.

"Oh, Harry!" she said, after the door closed upon her father, "how shall I ever undo the harm I have done to father? I'm not bearing my burden ill. I do all I can, and in time, maybe, I'll get the better of it; but he is so unhappy. Not that he guessed how foolish I had been; but he won't believe I'm able for the work I've taken upon myself, which is putting fresh life into me. Could you speak to him without betraying my secret, and persuade him that I am stronger than he thinks me, and all the better for getting about more, and having less time for idle fancies?"

I promised to speak to my Uncle; and, in return for her frank confidence, I told her something of my love for Marguerite, and that she was



not hopelessly above my reach. When I had a fitting home and station to place her in, I should seek her out, and invite her to share my fortunes, however humble they might be. Marguerite was not ambitious, nor did she belong by birth to a higher sphere; but she was infinitely above me in merit and refinement. I was trying to make myself worthier of her love.

"That's what makes you such a student," said Jessie, with warm interest in my love-tale. "I see your candle burning when everyone but myself is at rest; and you read sensible books, not like my love-tales and poems. But, anyhow, it's a good thing to be fond of reading. Now *he* is gone from the Hall, and I am stronger and better able to hear his name mentioned, I shall go there, and borrow some volumes from my Lord's library. Mrs. Kennedy is ever kind, and pleased to see me. You said you'd walk there with me some day, Harry. Shall we go together when work's over to-morrow?"

I was very glad to see her disposed to renew her intimacy with the steward's good-natured wife, and to take more active exercise; and agreed to accompany her. When I told Uncle George of our intention, and that I thought Jessie looked stronger and better, he did not contradict me; but his own manner was altered and unusually grave.

"Will she bear the long walk, Harry? You must not let her tire herself—my girl is but a



frail bit lassie," her father said anxiously. "There's a short cut through the birch-wood, but I doubt whether she or you would find it; and I am bound to go some distance to-morrow. But she could have the trap and the pony. I shall ride."

"No, no; the walk will do her nothing but good. I think I know the short path past the Deer Park and round at the back of the Hall, though I've not been over to the place itself since I came here. I am sure I can find the way, and it will be pleasanter than the dusty road."

"Aye, aye, it's a deal pleasanter," said Uncle George, somewhat dreamily. "At least I mind when I used to think so—and that nowhere did the birdies sing so blithely and the water run so fleetly as under the birken boughs at the head of the brook. I've not been there for many a year, but I don't suppose the place is much altered. I should like to see it again."

"Shall we wait another day till you are free? I am sure Jessie will not mind. We shall both be glad of your company."

"I'll go there my lane, laddie, if I go at all," said Uncle George emphatically. "It's not a spot I care for company in. I like to hear what the brook says, and the wind in the tree-tops, and the rustle of the rabbits among the fern and ling, and the dip of a fly in the water. I'll take my line some cool morning, when you're doing my work, and fish up the stream. There used to be



some fine trout in the pool under the old willow. I have not stirred that water since the place became my own; but I often fished the brook when I was a youth—and all stolen waters are sweet. Not but what I was free to carry a line and drop a fly wherever I liked, either on my Great-uncle's side of the stream, or in his Lordship's premises. I did pretty much as I liked here, in those days."

Uncle George sighed again, probably at some memory of the past. I knew that he had been a great fisherman in his youth; and, like many who are skilled in the gentle science of the angler, had cared more for it than any other sport: but I had never seen him indulge in it, nor indeed in any recreation. Early and late he was always at work and was in all things a grave, painstaking, earnest-minded man.

Jessie was quite surprised when I told her that I had seen her father looking out his long-disused fishing-tackle: and that evening, when, as often happened, I was reading aloud to her, Mr. Forbes came in and sat quite silently at the table with a box of various treasures, culled carefully and with unerring knowledge of the taste of the fish to be found in his own and other waters, fabricating a fly. He did not say a word when Jessie noticed his occupation, and admired some tiny feathers and insects' wings which lay in a corner of his hoard. But when she moved them



he watched her, and restored them carefully to their place.

They were not adapted for this month, nor for the place he meant to try, he said at last; as if reluctantly forced to speak, in answer to her question why he did not use the prettiest of his collection, but only some dull grey things which she thought not attractive. Fish were not always to be caught with bright colours—it depended on what the day was, and the food they sought. In fact, the trifles she liked were of no use at all, and might as well have been thrown away long ago—but——

“There, there,” he said, in a softer tone, “let them bide, child. They do no harm where they lie, and have lain many a long year; and I like to see them—so maybe, Jessie, father’s not more sense than you have, and has a liking for pretty useless things!”

He put away his wire and his fine silk and thread, as he spoke; and shut down the box-lid, carrying it off with him. He had a long way to go the morn, and must be up and away early.



## PART THE FIFTH.

### UNDER THE OLD WILLOW.

#### CHAPTER XVIII.

"Love and Time with reverence use,  
Treat them like a parting friend;  
Nor the golden gift refuse,  
Which in youth sincere they send:  
For each year their price is more,  
And they less simple than before."

DRYDEN.

CRAIGIE HALL, when I caught sight of it for the first time from the deep shade of the birch-wood where Jessie had paused to rest, was a much finer place than it looked across the water-meadow as I most often contemplated it. The little brook, as Uncle George said, seemed talking to itself. I wondered what it said to him which made him like to listen to it "his lane," or, as we should say in England, alone. To me it was nothing but a murmuring stream; but as Jessie's pale face bent



over it, I thought that for her too it had a tale to tell.

Suddenly she looked away from it and said:

"Harry, there are some letters cut in the old willow-trunk. Those are father's initials. Do you think he did it? Oh, I can't fancy him young and foolish like us. But did you mind that he had a sigh in his voice and a tear in his eye last night when he was talking about this place? See, here it is—G. F., cut deep, as if he meant it to last for ever. And what's this above, where the ivy has grown? I don't like to tear it away, but I wish it had not crept across the letters."

"Oh, I dare say there never were any more," I said, glancing at the green wreath, which seemed to have straggled down on purpose to baffle the girl's curiosity. "Boys are always cutting their initials in tree-barks. I have done it a hundred times without any particular meaning. Jessie, if you are rested, I think we had better move on a bit."

Jessie obeyed me reluctantly. That stern, quiet man's life-secret, if he had one, seemed sacred to me. I did not wish to pry into it. We walked on silently past the pool formed under the willow by the gushing of the stream out of the bank. Formerly there must have been a sort of rustic summerhouse or temple there; but the walls had fallen, and the roof lay low, like those above the fount in the woods of which the poetess says:



"The roof hath sunk from thy mossy walls,  
 And the sun's free glance on thy slumber falls;  
 And the dim tree-shadows across thee pass,  
 As the boughs are swayed o'er thy silvery glass  
 And the reddening leaves to thy breast are blown,  
 When the autumn wind hath a stormy tone  
 And thy bubbles rise to the flashing rain;  
 Bright Fount! thou art Nature's own again!"

\*       \*       \*       \*       \*

"Why is it that thus we may gaze on thee  
 To the brilliant sunshine sparkling free?  
 'Tis that all on earth is of Time's domain—  
 He has made thee Nature's own again!"

Truly, in the woods of Craigie, Nature had her own sweet way, though some tokens bore witness that once the hand of man had been at work there.

We came to the back of the mansion, through thick plantations which came close up to it; and entered by a side entrance—a veritable postern-gate, opening upon a gravelled walk which led up from the seat under the old willow. Jessie was tired, and I thought, as her father feared, the walk had been too long for her; but she revived after her kind hostess had given her some tea, over which we talked pleasantly enough. Mrs. Kennedy said she was glad of the rest herself, for she had been busy all the day. A letter had come from my Lord that morning, desiring that rooms should be prepared immediately for his sister, Lady Nairn. It was so long since any of the family had stopped at the Hall, that there were a good many arrangements to be made.



While Jessie was resting, Mrs. Kennedy showed me the Picture-gallery and the Library. It was a good opportunity. I disturbed no one; and I should most likely not have another, as the widowed Countess might stay some time; longer, it might be, than I should be able to remain with my Uncle, away from my own home and people.

There was a picture of the lady, taken when quite young, hanging on the wall—a very sweet, fair face—that of a girl scarcely past childhood. Mrs. Kennedy said she must be greatly altered; for it was more than thirty years since it was painted, and she was not in good health. Her life had not been a happy one. She had married a man three times her own age; it was believed in consequence of painful pecuniary embarrassments in the family. People said she blamed her brother; and that they had not been friends afterwards till now, when he seemed very anxious to please her. The reconciliation had taken place quite lately.

I turned back for a minute before leaving the room, and gave another glance at the bright, beautiful, girlish face and slender but healthful form, over which a quarter of a century of sorrow cast so deep a shade. Truly, man's selfish extravagance works fearful havoc. How many a weary womanhood and blighted girl-life has to be sacrificed on the shrine of vanity and recklessness.

My Aunt's words came back to me, warning me to love truly, or not at all; never to make



the woman who trusted me rue the hour in which she first laid her hand in mine. How often had she, as well as this fair young sister, laughed and jested with him, and believed wholly in that pleasant lover and brother! and now one had gone to her grave unwedded—the other was a mourning widow, and had only just learnt to forgive him.

Perhaps there might be other causes for the overthrow of that young creature's happiness; but, if there were, I did not know of them: and Mrs. Kennedy's few words, for she had not known the family long, gave but one indication, which I was able to follow up well enough to account for the change in Lord Maskelyne's once beautiful sister.

Jessie had recovered herself, and was quite cheerful on our way home. We did not return the same way, as she thought it would be gloomy in the woods; but crossed the park by a footpath, and then walked along the lake-shore, watching the red sunset on its waters.

Uncle George was more talkative than usual, after his daughter, by his advice, had retired early to rest; but he did not bestow any confidence upon me, nor did I mention, any more than his daughter, our discovery of the initials carved on the willow-trunk by the pond.

He had heard the news of the Countess's expected arrival from Kennedy, on his way home, before our return. The steward had been asking him a good many questions about the fishing,



which was to be strictly preserved for the Countess's amusement. Of late there had been a good deal of carelessness; and now boards were to be put up, and the keepers were to prevent poaching the water as vigilantly as in the preserves.

"I suppose they look on me as pretty nearly the oldest inhabitant," said Mr. Forbes. "At all events Kennedy, who is no sportsman, is quite ignorant. The very first board he put up was wrong, for it happened to be over one of my bits of water; but the Countess, poor thing, is welcome to any use she can make of it. There used to be big trout there."

"You will have to show her the most favourable spots, Uncle George," I said. "I am not more of a fisherman than Kennedy; but you must have fished these waters many a time."

My Uncle looked at me fixedly for a moment.

"I used to know where to throw a line; but one gets out of practice," he answered, quietly. "When I first came to pay a visit to the last proprietor of Birklands—your Great-uncle, Harry—I was a keen brother of the angle. But I fear I've lost the gentle art now, and I am not a lover of great ladies' company. The Countess may fish both sides of the stream for what I care. It is strange, though, that I should have taken down my line and got rod and tackle ready just before Kennedy asked me those questions."



He got up as if to go to rest, but I stopped him.

"Was it Lord Maskelyne's extravagance that caused his sister to marry a man thrice her own age? If so, he has much to answer for."

"She was sacrificed, that's all I can tell ye about it," said my Uncle, standing still, near the door. "I don't know that the entire blame rests with her brother. The Ducies were a reckless lot—one and all, father and son, aye, and grandsire too, I believe. Ruin had been staring them in the face for a long time. My father was drawn into the vortex. He lent money to the young heir, who had a tongue to while a man's heart (let alone a woman's) out of his bosom, as well as the money out of his pocket. When it came to a crisis, the debt to us was one of those that never got paid. It was not one of what were called *claims of honour*, and father never pressed for it. He went away; and lived where you are trying to make a livelihood, more successfully, I trust, than he did. Those were hard times, Harry, at the Farm and at the Hall. There was not much difference then between us. My eldest Uncle held on here, but it was a severe struggle. Still, he was much respected, and I, as his favourite and godson and namesake, led a pleasant life, after all said and done, at Birklands. It was thought the inheritance would some day be mine—as it is now, but only by purchase. Well, the hunting, and the



fishing, and the play-acting (ye'll be surprised to hear I cared ever for such things, I'd not even name them to Jessie) came to an end, and everything was in a tangle. The old man fairly broke his heart, and laid him down to die. There was a rout, and all was broken up. I was not famed for patience; and, after all my vanities here and being taught to hold my head up like a gentleman, I could not stand the rough ways at the Northumberland farm when I went home—other things too weighed heavily on me: so I just cut it short and went to America. I married there, as you know, after a time; and had wife and bairns to look after: but I never got back the light heart and free tread that I had at Birklands."

Uncle George gave a sigh to his bygone youth, and perhaps to some tender memories which he had not thought proper to name.

"Lord Maskelyne came into a fortune when his Uncle died; and it is to be hoped that he will not run through it as fast as most of his family have done. He was an embarrassed man till he got the English estates—partly through his own faults, partly from those of others," concluded my Uncle. "But the inheritance came too late to save his sister from an unhappy marriage; and she had to bear the weary weight of an unloved and unloving yoke all through her youth, and until middle age. I can scarcely believe it has come upon her, for she was as bonnie, aye, even bonnier



and younger than Jessie, when I last saw her cast a line into the brook. I'm glad she's fond of fishing still—it'll carry her where birds sing, and waters ripple, and blue sky peeps through the trees, and perhaps smooth some wrinkles that have crept over her fair brow. But it's a late hour for me to be sitting up talking idly, after what I can tell ye has been a hard day's work. I confess I'm fairly tired out."

He did look pale; and, as he left the room, I heard him give a sigh of utter weariness. I did not follow him immediately; but sat over the fire thinking of what he had told me respecting our family fortunes and misfortunes; and the manner in which, curiously enough, they had been interwoven with Lord Maskelyne's. From time to time the tranquil scenes returned to me which I had seen that evening: the brook, and the still pool from which it issued, under the bending willow-tree. Then I saw, partly shadowed by the roof, since fallen, of the rustic temple or summer-house, the fair, laughing girlish face now hidden beneath a widow's cap. More plainly than Jessie had deciphered them stood out the letters carved by a boyish hand—G. F. and E. D.; for I had made them out in spite of the encroaching ivy wreath, and the two last were the same as those beneath the picture of Eleonore Ducie (she looked more like Nellie), Lord Maskelyne's only sister, now the Dowager Countess of Nairn.



## CHAPTER XIX.

“We look before and after,  
And pine for what is not;  
Our sincerest laughter  
With some pain is fraught;  
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.”  
SHELLEY.

THOUGH so much care had been taken to promote sport and afford her amusement, I never heard that Lady Nairn, during her visit at Craigie Hall, caught a single fish. She went out early and came back late, and the gillies and keepers were active in her service; but after walking some distance along the banks of the stream, followed by her devoted adherents—for everyone about the place loved the gentle lady—she would send them all away, desiring them to lay a plaid down on the ground for her to rest upon, and to leave her alone.

Hours afterwards, when one of her attentive servants would bring her, unbidden, some slight refreshment, the Countess was sure to be sitting unoccupied, with her fishing-rod and basket beside



her, and a book in her lap, looking far away into the past or the future; or, it might be, thinking of neither the one nor the other, but simply enjoying the repose of the summer afternoon among the heather—the flitting of birds and butterflies, and the sighing of the wind through the birch-trees.

Anyone who looked in her face could see that life had for years been a wearisome conflict. People said her sufferings from her husband's eccentricities, temper, and selfish humours had been faerful, and that he had been jealous of the ground she trod upon, though more from pride than affection. He was gone to his grave now, so there was no need to rake up the matter and catalogue his evil deeds. Suffice it that they were such that men liked not to think what that fair lady had patiently borne.

If ever a woman was purified by suffering into an angel, Lady Nairn was that angelic being. There were still the beautiful features and soft lines, where dimples had played in girlhood at the corners of her rosy mouth. The glad light seemed to shine down from heaven into those hazel eyes, which lightened back again as they looked out frankly upon God's beautiful, gladsome earth. Though the bright complexion had faded, the tints were pure and fair, and the chestnut hair was still abundant and glossy. To my mind, and I was



not the only person who thought so, the Countess was a lovely woman still.

She did not go into society, or return any of the visits paid to her, assigning as a reason her extreme delicacy of health. Even the easiest carriage exercise fatigued her; riding was forbidden, and she could not walk far. Nevertheless, she spent most of her time out of doors, and was never at home when the few neighbouring families, and some from a distance, called upon her.

At the Kirk she was a regular attendant; and every cottage on her brother's estate, sooner or later, was blessed by her presence. She often visited the little village school, where the children worshipped her. The lonely farmhouses among the hills, where she had been known and loved as a girl, were not beyond her walking powers; or she would mount a little Highland pony, and have some trusted attendant to walk by her side. I met her sometimes in these rambles, and she always smiled sweetly upon me. There was more in her courteous greeting than mere urbanity. One felt the better for it, though not a word was spoken. Or if she uttered, in passing, a brief remark, as she would do to the shepherds on the hills, or the lads at play, the music of her speech and the sunshine in her looks made the summer day seem brighter and more genial.

One house in the scattered parish she did not enter, and that was ours; nor did Mr. Forbes



intrude upon her loneliness. It was quite evident that she desired tranquillity, and, like a royal personage travelling incognito, the best manners consisted in yielding to her desire to be let alone.

Jessie once asked her father if he ought not to call, but he said "No" so decidedly, that she dared not press the question why he alone of all the neighbourhood had not paid his respects to his Lordship's sister? His daughter went often to see Mrs. Kennedy; and, like everyone else, was the better for the Countess's presence at the Hall. Lady Nairn had taken a great fancy to her, and chose books which were much more suitable for a young maiden than the poetical studies recommended by "Mr. Frank." Jessie raved about her goodness; and though her father was not induced to break his resolution, he would listen to her and even encourage her to talk about her new friend. It would do her nothing but good, he said, one night after she had left us, to be with such a person as Lady Nairn. From childhood she had been as pure as gold—such gold as he had seen washed down bit by bit in the diggings.

He did not add a word to this emphatic commendation, but marched straight off to bed, and slept upon it. The next morning, just as we were going off to the hay-field, where the men were busy, a pencilled message came from the Hall: "Would Mr. Forbes have the goodness to allow her Ladyship to fish his side of the water,



and in the pool under the old willow-tree. She had a fancy to try if there were as many trout there as formerly."

I never saw a man so confused as my good Uncle when the scrap of paper, just a piece torn off a sheet, with no address or signature, was put into his hand. He gave it to me as if scarcely conscious what was wanted or what course he must pursue, and then as irresolutely snatched it away again, and put it in his waistcoat-pocket. When I reminded him that the Countess's servant was waiting for an answer, and had said a verbal one would be sufficient, Mr. Forbes muttered: "Of course, of course. The Countess can fish both sides of the stream—wherever she likes best. It's all just the same thing."

He turned back into the house, telling me not to wait for him; and I went at once to help in the joyous labour of the hay-making. The men more than once wondered not to see the Master; but the day wore on until the afternoon, without bringing him. I dined with Jessie, and some of the maidens of the household who came down to help us, and brought us refreshments, of which we partook under shadow of the haycocks. She too inquired if I had seen anything of Father. He had taken his fishing-rod out of the hall, she said, and told her not to wait dinner. She might take it with me, and lend a hand with the damsels in the hay-field if the sun was not too powerful. There



were clouds coming up in the west, and it would be a good day for throwing a fly. Perhaps he might bring us some trout for supper.

Her father seemed quite cheerful, Jessie said; more so than he had been of late; she hoped the fishing might do him good. He must be fond of it to go away when we were all so busy, and clouds coming up which might gather, and bring rain later on in the day. I said, if they did, it was not likely to be more than a passing shower; the air was too light for thunderstorms, and a little wetting would do the hay no harm. We finished our repast, and went to work again, without further comment. At supper there was a handsome dish of trout, and Uncle George said that was only a sample, and not the finest specimens of what he had caught in the pool under the old willow. He had felt himself bound to tell Lady Nairn that she was quite at liberty to fish wherever she liked in his waters. There was no trusting to a verbal message, so he had gone to meet her at the Spring-head. It was not the first time they had fished the brook together, but she did not care now to try her luck. She sat on the bank watching him, whilst he cast his line into the water. There were cloud-shadows as he expected, and the new flies answered perfectly. On the whole, he had made a good basket.

I must own to having felt a good deal of curiosity, but I asked no questions. Jessie was



less reticent. She wanted to know what the Countess said, and how she looked; and what her father had known of her formerly.

"One question at a time, lass," said Mr. Forbes. "The Countess looks like a woman who is a widow indeed—a good woman if there ever was one. Now for the next: What did she say? Very little—not as much in an hour as you would in five minutes, and she did not speer at me with questions. Now that is not all—and the last would take more time than I could spare to answer it. How's the hay getting on, Harry?"

"Oh, finely," said Jessie, preventing my answer. "Never mind about the hay, father. I want you to tell me about Lady Nairn. Was she not very pretty as a girl, like her picture that hangs in the gallery? Did you know her well?"

"Aye, aye, well enough—and she was very bonnie," said Mr. Forbes. "She's a beautiful woman still, to my thinking, though she has gone through a deal of sorrow. Her hair is not grey, and her eyes have still the lights of youth shining purely within them. She's very bonnie now."

"To be sure she is," said Jessie. "Oh, father, I like to hear you talk about her! it makes you look a deal younger and handsomer yourself, when you go back to those early days. I am sure this spell of idleness has been good for you. Did her Ladyship catch any fish? I thought she was fond of it; but the men say she has never, to their



knowledge, cast a line into the water since she came here."

"No; she has suffered too much herself, she told me, to bear the thought of giving pain to any living creature," said Mr. Forbes, gravely. "Her mind's turned away from it. She's not like a thoughtless girl or a careless child, such as she was, Heaven bless her, when I first saw her, and saved her from running headlong into the lake. Did she speak to you of that, Jessie? She's not forgotten it?"

"Yes, she told me you had saved her once from a terrible danger, and she must always be grateful. I should have named it the morn, but you were in a hurry. Oh, father, I think she's hurt at your never having called to ask after her. Everyone else in the country-side has done so."

"Well, it's all set straight now," said her father. "I told her I could not come like others, just in a formal way, and be denied, as I heard was mostly the case. We should meet some day, I knew, by accident, as we did this morning, and take up the old thread of memory. You see, Jessie, the Countess of Nairn is a very different person from the bonnie bit lassie in a pinafore that I pulled up out of the deepest corner of the loch—or the chestnut-haired maiden of blooming sixteen with whom I've often fished the brook and hunted for birds'-nests. I was not going to presume upon former intimacy, nor could I bear to



be treated like a stranger, so I just bided my time. When I saw her sitting under the old willow to-day, I saw that at heart she was not changed. We were the same human beings and fellow-creatures as when we were boy and girl—youth and maiden—on the banks of the loch, and under the birch-boughs. If you wait, all comes right in time, as sure as there's a good Father in Heaven, and true warm hearts that never forget the good old times, here below."

He bade us good-night, and went to his rest quietly.

Jessie said not a word, but her eyes glistened through tears as she went to the table, and opened, at another place, the big Bible from which her father had read a chapter to the household. She too, "puir lassie," as he often called her, was dreeing her weird, and biding her time patiently, as Aunt Jessica had done before her; but, unluckily, all hearts are not as true, and loyal, and constant as those still beating warmly in the bosoms of George Forbes and Eleonora Ducie.



## CHAPTER XX.

"Needs no show of mountain hoary,  
Winding shore or deepening glen,  
Where the landscape in its glory  
Teaches truth to wandering men:  
Give true hearts but earth and sky,  
And some flowers to bloom and die,—  
Homely scenes and simple views  
Lowly thoughts may best infuse.

"See the soft green willow springing  
Where the waters gently pass,  
Every way her free arms flinging  
O'er the moist and reedy grass.  
Long ere winter blasts are fled,  
See her tipped with vernal red,  
And her kindly flower displayed  
Ere her leaf can cast a shade.

"Though the rudest hand assail her,  
Patiently she droops awhile;  
But when showers and breezes hail her,  
Wears again her willing smile.  
Thus I learn Contentment's power  
From the slighted willow bower,  
Ready to give thanks and live  
On the least that Heaven may give."

KEBLE.



MY own first experience of the soothing effects of Lady Nairn's voice and smile was gained after this wise. I was walking down a pleasant lane which often attracted me, though it led nowhither, because it had an English look about it, when I suddenly became aware that I might be of service to a fellow-creature. The sun shone so brightly across the grass and wet gravel, where a brook had overflowed both, that at first I only discerned that the person riding in front of me wore a dark cloth skirt and shadowy hat, with a veil floating in the summer air. The pony objected strongly to crossing the water, which in one part was rather deep and flecked with quivering leaf-shadows and bright gleams of sunshine.

It scarcely took a moment to quiet the timid animal. The lady did not seem frightened, and I was about to pass on with a silent bow, after leading her tiny steed through the water, when she spoke to me. I scarcely know what it was in her air and manner, the soft glance of her eyes and the movement of her gracious lips, which made those few words of thanks a fitting reward for a much greater service than it had been my good luck to render her.

I had felt rather out of sorts with Fortune previously—inclined to feel myself left in the cold while others were basking in the sunshine; but when Lady Nairn's gentle tones reached my ear, when her smile warmed my heart, I felt that I,



too, was a man entitled to consideration, since she had thought about me, and now condescended, without any formal introduction, to address me by name; and to ask why, when we had so many mutual friends, I had never taken the trouble of calling upon her, and inquiring after those who took a most warm interest in my welfare. Would I mind walking a little way with her, since we *had* met, and opening a gate which would enable her to reach the Hall by a shorter path through the plantations, and past the pool under the old willow?

Thus invited, I was glad to keep beside her, more especially as Lady Nairn began almost immediately to speak of Marguerite and Blanche, the French Sisters, as she heard I called them. She knew apparently all about my Farm under the English birch-trees, Haggisthorn, the stepping-stones, my Aunt Jessica, and even the Widow Brand. Hers was, in fact, a sort of royal memory and she had the happy art of calling up and connecting together and putting into words, which seemed to come fresh from the heart, all the ideas most calculated to flatter and conciliate the fortunate individual upon whom her thoughts rested. Never have I seen anyone gifted with such a winning, cordial, truthful grace.

I heard now, for the first time, how completely Marguerite had resigned her own will, and altered all her arrangements, for the sake of her afflicted



cousin. A deep shadow passed over Lady Nairn's fair brow as she mentioned Blanche. I saw that she doubted the permanent restoration of her bodily and mental health. Her brother, she said, had always been of a most sanguine disposition, and would not hear reason on this or any subject where his feelings were deeply interested; but she and Marguerite were very anxious about her. It was at her house in London that suddenly, without apparent cause, Blanche had fallen from the heights of love and happiness into a terrible state of despondency. The marriage was of necessity postponed, and all thought of the separation from Marguerite, which greatly distressed her, had been given up. Even now, though the quiet visit to the Normandy farm had done wonders for a time, all excitement was strictly forbidden, and Lord Maskelyne and Mr. Ducie were advised to remain away from the Manor House.

We had by this time reached the pool under the willow; Lady Nairn checked her pony, now aware that home was near, and anxious to get to his stable.

"I must not trespass longer on your time, Mr. Forbes," she said. "My way from this familiar spot is quite open and easy. I only wish I could see as plainly a road to make all whom I love happy. But we none of us know from day to day what course may be the best to pursue. Marguerite



and I had laid down so many plans, and yet nothing seems likely to be realised—neither Swiss mountains nor Italian lakes will gladden our eyes this autumn! Here am I under the old willow, content with my childhood's haunts; and Marguerite and Blanche are once more acting the *rôle* of the French Sisters at the Northumbrian Manor House. Who can tell where we may be, and what may be our lot, or even our wishes, in a year's time!"

The Countess looked at me with a smile, half arch, half pathetic. The leaves of the old willow rustled overhead; the water lapped its roots; a dreamy tranquillity pervaded the soft home scene; even the pony stood stock-still and seemed half-disposed to go to sleep. Not a fish leaped up in the pool to catch the dragon-flies skimming over its surface.

"After all," I said, "there may be as much, nay, more, happiness in these quiet nooks, where life flows on evenly, as in grander and more exciting scenes. Under the Willow, or under the Birches—wherever true love and contentment abide—where there is honour and honesty, and work to be done—men and women may rest satisfied."

"Perhaps you are right," Lady Nairn replied. "I, at least, have long since done with ambition and learnt resignation. But you are young; you have the world before you. Should you be satis-



fied to dwell always in the Farm under the birch-trees, beside the Mill-stream?"

"Yes, provided I were not utterly alone," I said, irresistibly drawn on by her sympathy. "You, Lady Nairn, can best tell whether there is any chance for me of winning such companionship as would make a drearier place than the Moorland Farm you seem to know so well, a veritable garden of Eden."

"Once upon a time," the Countess said, smilingly, "not so long ago, and not so far away, as it is the wont of fairy stories to commence with setting forth, I was stepping across the grey Northern Moors with one who seemed to know every inch of the way by heart. We rested awhile under Haggisthorn, and when we were tired of sitting still my friend helped me to cross the stepping-stones, and to the place where we had left our ponies, not far from Stonelands. I remember she stooped to gather a little tuft of blue forget-me-nots growing at the base of the wall. I shall not easily forget that ride across the Moors, with the brisk wind blowing in our faces. Perhaps you know the white winding bridle-road strewn with sparks of granite glittering like diamonds? There was nothing extraordinary in the scenery, any more than there is in yonder pool of shimmering water and the trailing willow-boughs dipping with such a soft sough into it. And yet, Mr. Forbes, there are moments when such quiet



landscapes seem glorified, when we prefer them to storied ruins, grand mountains, and all the lavish loveliness of Nature. Such a glamour, I confess, I have felt *here*, and I think it must at some period have existed for my companion on the Northumbrian Moors; touching and gilding that lonely road, the tufts of moss and the wild flowers clinging to the rude wall, the brook rushing past the stepping-stones, and the granite needle crowning the waste. I did not ask any questions, but I saw it in her face. I knew from experience that, just as through all joys and sorrows, during a long sad life, I have seen yon old tree and its reflection in the water, so with her that vision would abide faithfully through whatever lands it might be her lot to roam; and whatever might be her fate, so she too would see in fancy, if not permitted to re-visit them, those Northern Moors. The water would run past her feet as she paused in fancy on the stepping-stones, and the May winds would scatter the white hawthorn-blossoms from the boughs of the old scathed tree twisted by the blasts at the base of Haggisthorn Peak. It is not always granted to a woman, as it may be to me, to return to the thoughts of youth—to look again upon the ancient trees, and see myself reflected, changed as I am by time, in the pool that mirrored my girlish face. But if she lives, as I trust she may, long and happily, the girl who rode by my side on that windy summer afternoon across the



Northumbrian Moor will in after-life recall, many and many a time, the heights and hollows, the glancing rivulet and granite column, at which she looked with love-lighted eyes that day—not for the first time.”

“One word more,” I said, involuntarily laying my hand on the pony’s rein as Lady Nairn seemed disposed to ride on. “Did you—did Marguerite take you that day to my Farm? Was the light you speak of still in her eyes then?”

“Nay; you must ask her that question yourself,” said the Countess, giving me her hand, as I, with an apology, dropped her rein. “We did go to the farm under the birches, certainly; but I think she left me to make acquaintance with the widow, and to rest in your sunny parlour, whilst she went into the garden to see how your flowers were flourishing, and to look at the distant hills. I did not see her face just then, and as we rode home I thought that she looked pale and grave. The glamour does not last long, though it may through a lifetime often revisit us. It is apt to go off when the sunshine dies, or sometimes ends washed away in a rain of tears. I think I saw traces of weeping later on, when we rode in dewy twilight back to the Manor House.”

Lady Nairn touched her pony’s shining flank with her whip, and we parted silently, but with a warm hand-clasp. I did not follow her, nor did I return home immediately. I lay on the grass



under the willow-tree till twilight, chill and dewy,  
wrapt the woods and waters in her cold embrace.  
Then, just as the last faint ray passed off the face  
of the pool, I went back to Birklands.



## CHAPTER XXI.

“Let the luscious South wind  
Breathe in lovers’ sighs,  
While the lazy gallants  
Bask in ladies’ eyes.  
What does he but soften  
Heart alike and pen?  
’Tis the hard grey weather  
Breeds hard Englishmen.

“What’s the soft South-wester?  
’Tis the ladies’ breeze,  
Bringing home their true loves  
Out of all the seas:  
But the black North-easter,  
Through the snow-storm hurled,  
Drives our English hearts of oak  
Seaward round the world.

“Come, and strong within us  
Stir the Viking’s blood;  
Bracing brain and sinew,  
Blow, thou wind of God!”

CHARLES KINGSLEY.

WITHOUT actually desiring to bring blight and mildew to the crops, and a murrain on the flocks



and herds—for was it not the East wind that brought the locusts, even in a southern clime, and that has borne many a plague on its wings since for man and beast?—I did long for a fresh blast of the breezes on the Northern Moors during the hot Midsummer day which followed my interview with Lady Nairn. I was, indeed, inclined to say with the poet:

“Tired we are of summer,  
Tired of gaudy glare;  
Showers soft and steaming,  
Hot and breathless air;”

and although neither my Uncle nor I were men likely to spend the day in “listless dalliance,” the Countess’s words had conjured up a vivid picture of those Moorland heights, on which the winds were for ever at play, and I longed to feel them sweep past me.

It was, however, somewhat difficult, as well as ungracious, to alter my plans, since I had promised Susan and her bridegroom undisturbed possession of my house for some time after their marriage, which was, indeed, hastened in consequence of my suggestion; and my Uncle had begged me not to leave him during this busy season. I took a long, and this time uninterrupted, walk, in spite of the almost overpowering noon-tide heat, when the men left off work, without succeeding in curbing my impatience.



I think Jessie perceived in the evening, when we returned home, thoroughly tired, that I was even more restless than weary. She sang song after song in the gloaming to her father and me; and the words and melodies were all tender and soothing, and not so melancholy as her minstrelsy sometimes was. There breathed through all the love-songs she chose that night a note of hope and of encouragement which thrilled through the soft air of the moonlit room.

When she was tired, Jessie took a place beside me, at the open casement in the broad window seat. Her father was sitting quite silent, resting himself at the other end of the long, low, oak-panelled parlour, and did not disturb our quiet conversation. Outside, the moon rode high in Heaven, through a cloudless sky. The mists and moisture which had made the day heavy and disagreeable, seemed to have been dried up by her clear shining; but it was very warm still. Not a breeze ruffled the lake, stirred the pinetrees, or even shook the light leaves of the birches. Now and then a moth flew past us, or a bat swooped through the air, which was full of the soft murmur of summer insects, and the fragrance of the honeysuckle-laden porch.

"Won't you tell me what troubles you to-day, Harry?" Jessie said at last, gently, after some moments of absolute silence had fallen between us. "It's not the heat only or the work, though father



said both were trying, and you've had a long walk besides. There's something weighing upon your spirits since you spoke in the lane yesterday with Lady Nairn; and yet people are generally better and blither for holding speech with her. At least, 'I am,' she added, thoughtfully. "There's mostly something comforting in her words."

"Yes, yes; Lady Nairn is as sweet a woman as can be found this side of the Border," I said. "But home is home, Jessie, and there's been something in the soft air to-day that did not suit me. I'd rather have breasted our stiff northerly wind on the Moors. 'Twill pass over, lassie, just as everything goes by us; but, there now, I'm afraid something that can never be replaced may pass away too. It's like wilful tempting of Providence to let opportunities go by."

"Of course it is, Harry, and why should ye?" said Jessie, more energetically than usual. "You're not a poor girl, or foolish woman, or silly child, that needs to wait for leave, and let opportunities go by, eating your heart out, like us puir lassies. It is for you to go in and win, as the lads say at the games they play on the green yonder. It's no one's fault but your own, surely, if ye let the lucky moment—there's but one in a lifetime, may be—slip past without gaining the prize."

"Aye, if you are sure of victory—but that's the question, Jessie; a man's never sure of it till he's tried, and then if I were once baffled I'd never



have the face to try again. While you're in doubt, you've hope and pleasant thoughts to fall back upon; but if you find you've been too presumptuous, and it's like enough one would be sent back defeated, what's left for you then but blighted hopes and memories that are more like a curse than a blessing? 'Tis best perhaps to bide one's time patiently."

"And what would ye say if anither that's less thrang wi' doubts and scruples, and has less modesty, steps in and wins while ye're looking on?" said Jessie, reproachfully. "That's just how it is with the best of ye; ye wait, and wait, and what is a puir lassie to do? She just thinks ye don't care for her, and turns to some bolder wooer, who shows what little feeling he has more plainly. When first ye told us of your meeting with Lady Nairn, and how kindly she had spoken about your friends in England, and reproached ye for not going to see her, there was a light in your eye and more colour in your cheek than I've ever seen there. Ye looked as if some bird of the air, or breeze from the Moor, had brought ye a message across the Border. But it has gone out and faded away since. All the day ye've been dull and sad, and now you talk of nothing but doubts and difficulties. Harry, there's a sort of second-sight—an instinct which we get through disappointment. It has come to me lately, and I bid ye trust it. *Now* is *your* lucky moment. This



is the time that ye must *not* let go by. Sorry as I shall feel to lose you, I would be like the ladies in the old ballads, and fasten on your sword and spurs and helmet, and send you forth gladly and confidently to win or lose in the great battle. Yes, and I am sure it would be to win what your soul most desires."

Her voice rose higher, and roused Mr. Forbes. He came near the window and looked out at the night.

"'Tis a bonnie sight," he said gravely. "Oh, but the moon is grand when she sits on her throne in a cloudless night, and the waters mirror her! Look, child, how solemnly still the woods and waters lie in the quiet night, save just where her shining makes a lane of light up to the chamber of God's presence! It's like a good woman making earth's sadness radiant, and leading our thoughts up to Heaven. Get the books, Jessie. It's later than it should be. I can't have been to sleep, for I heard your voices; but I didn't mind the clock striking. I'll just read a psalm and a few words of prayer and praise, and then we'll go to our beds rejoicing."

Jessie placed the large Bible reverently before her father; and in the unimpeded moonlight he could see the words, which, indeed, he knew by heart, and read them with his usual simple fervour. The concluding prayer was always extempore; and whether or not some words of our confidential



talk had reached his ear I know not, but it seemed singularly appropriate when he solemnly implored a blessing upon our honest hopes and endeavours, and that the wish of our hearts might, if possible, and consistently with our highest interests, be granted to us.

Very few words passed between us afterwards, but it almost seemed to me an answer to my silent and his uttered prayer when the next post brought me a letter from Susan, begging me to release her husband from further superintendence of my affairs, as he had more than enough to do in seeing after his own. The Manor House was quite ready for their occupation, and with many thanks to me for the acceleration of their union, and the convenience my offer of a temporary home had afforded them, they would now be glad to take possession of their own comfortable residence; the sooner they got into it the better, as they would get rid of the work-people, who were dawdling unnecessarily over the last remains of labour. Mrs. Brand urged their departure warmly, evidently longing for my return; and assuring them that she was quite capable of seeing after all necessary domestic matters until I came back, which she felt certain would be immediately. Until my return, however, Susan's husband would certainly look after my farm together with his own business as carefully as the trouble



of moving their quarters and his own arduous labours would permit.

Neither Jessie nor her father said a word to detain me when I told them of my summons: they were, like Mrs. Brand, anxious to speed the parting guest, and showed the truest kindness in expediting my preparations.

Nevertheless, there was a sigh on her lips and a tear in her eye as Jessie stood under the honeysuckles of the porch bidding me good-bye, and my Uncle wrung my hand with emotion. It was just as if one of his own poor brave boys were going out into the world after craving his parting blessing.

I thought of Aunt Jessica, and he looked just like her, when he gave it to me heartily. Then, as if loath to separate, he walked with me through two or three fields, talking of many things, but not of the matters next to both our hearts, till we took leave of each other a second time, when we came to the broad high-road leading past the Border over Carter Fell.

I slept that night at a little inn by Tweed-side, and I thought of the house by the Scottish loch and of Jessie's sweet songs and stirring words, when I saw the moon rise over the Moors and shine down into the river which divides the sister countries. It was, as my Uncle said the night before, a bonnie night, and a grand sight as the pure white lustre fell over hill and dale, sparkled



on the running water, and made every stone and twig on the river's bank as plainly visible and far more lovely than in the full light of day.

"Oh, hae ye seen the Tweed while the moon shone bright,  
And the stars gemmed the sky wi' their siller light?

If ye haena seen it, then,

Half its sweets ye canna ken;

Oh, gae back and look again

On a shining night."



# PART THE SIXTH.

## MARGUERITE.

### CHAPTER XXII.

“Ask me not how much I love thee—  
Do not question why;  
I have told thee the tale  
In the evening pale,  
With a tear and a sigh.

“I told thee when love was hopeless,  
But now he is wild, and sings  
That the stars above  
Shine ever on love,  
Though they frown on the fate of kings.

“Oh, a king would have loved and left thee,  
And away thy sweet love cast;  
But I am thine,  
Whilst the stars shall shine—  
To the last—to the last.”

BARRY CORNWALL.



NEVER had the Moorland Farm seemed so homelike to me as it did on my return from the North. There were traces of a woman's presence and kindly forethought. Susan had insisted on leaving behind her several little ornamental pieces of furniture, which, though they were merely inexpensive trifles, gave quite a different aspect to my parlour. Strangely enough, too, they were more adapted for a lady's use than for a North-country farmer, but I did not find any fault with her gifts on that account.

Very differently arranged were the flowers she had gathered before leaving the place, where she said her first weeks of married life had flown away like a dream, to the Widow Brand's tasteless nosegays. The pretty, tasteful glasses, and the wicker flower-stand full of choice plants, with a low chair to match, and a little round work- or tea-table, all light and fanciful, gave an air of elegance to my homely parlour. The fresh breeze from the neighbouring Moors lifted the delicate muslin curtains which she had looped up gracefully; and wafted the scent of the garden-flowers from the long walk in front of the windows, where Marguerite had walked up and down looking at the view of the distant hills, whilst Lady Nairn rested in the old bee-hive chair. I fancied I could see them both; and I thought that at last I had found the woman who would be, if I could win her consent, my fitting helpmate.



Susan and her husband walked down to welcome me home as soon as they heard of my arrival, and spent the evening with me. When they were gone, Mrs. Brand gave me, with a somewhat mysterious air, a letter, which she said had been given to her, to be forwarded to me, by one of the ladies at the Manor House. The widow had told her that I was come back, and asked her to walk in, but Miss Duval would not stop. She had left the note, and begged that I would send an answer or call at the Hall the next day.

Marguerite's note was very simple and touching. It was written, she said, partly at Blanche's instigation. I must recollect how fond her little sister had always been of me, and now she thought my influence might be of real service. They both wanted very much to see me; and I had promised, if need arose, to be like a brother. At least, she thought I had said something of the kind, and she believed I generally meant more than I said. The Farm would now, they had heard, be left empty; therefore it was likely that I should soon be on my way home, and both she and Blanche trusted that my first visit, after my return, would be paid to them at the Manor House. Not knowing my exact address in Dumfriesshire, Marguerite intended to bring the letter herself to the Farm, and to leave it with Mrs. Brand, to be forwarded to me.

It was too late to act upon Marguerite's



suggestion that night, but I went to bed full of hope and courage; resolved to test my fate on the morrow. I saw from the tone of her letter that she was more sanguine than Lady Nairn about her sister; and that she wished me to cheer her drooping spirits and give her a better confidence in the future. It would have been impossible at any time of her life, even at its most important crisis, for Marguerite to think only of herself; but I believed, and the conviction was very precious, that she summoned me to her side as much on her own account, and because she needed my support and valued my affection, as for the sake of her sister.

Even the Moorland breezes failed to refresh me as I walked up to the great house to meet my fate. Again I could not help desponding when I thought of the difference between us. I thoroughly appreciated the grace and refinement of the sisters. I remembered Lord Maskelyne's approbation of Marguerite's powers of mind and beauty of person. Frank Ducie, infatuated lover as he was, had yet said that she was the woman whom he most admired and revered on the face of the earth. A happier sensation replaced my bashful doubts when I recalled what he had also said about Marguerite's wishing him to become my friend. I walked on with a bolder step, communing with thoughts now hopeful, and feeling that I had some right to believe that, though far above me in all respects,



the lady of my love had even from my boyhood taken a deep and kindly interest in my humble fortunes. I felt the touch of her soft hand as she clung to me at the crossing of the stepping-stones; I heard the tender, painful intonation of her voice when I persisted in misunderstanding her; and I went on my way manfully and not without hope.

The Manor House looked much more cheerful as I approached it than it had done when I paid my first and last visit to its master. There were no thunderclouds hanging over the grey old house; the ancient trees were full of foliage which hid any indications of decay. The hay was carried, and the green corn waved in the light summer breeze; in the moat the fish were courting the sunbeams coyly, and darting at the flies. I thought of the French sisters when I saw Marguerite and Blanche among the trees of the garden, their high white Normandie caps with long lappets, and chintz dresses, making them look like foreign peasants. This time it was my love who came to the gate to meet me, and lingered there a moment in soft, whispered conversation. Our wooing was very short, but sweet—all the sweeter, I think, for its brevity. In fact, our love-making had been done long ago at the stepping-stones over the brook under Haggisthorn Peak. The moment Marguerite left her sister's side, and set her dainty feet on



the grass to come and meet me, I knew that I had won my bride.

Blanche received me as if I were already, as I soon hoped to be, her brother. We had no secrets that need be kept from her, and her fair face brightened when she saw that we were happy. It was in reality, she declared, at *her* bidding that Marguerite wrote to me. She never thought of herself, but Blanche wanted to make us happy. "The fact is, Harry," she said, with a sweet, sad smile, "I have thought of nothing but myself all my life, till quite lately; and God has punished me for my selfishness by giving me everything I could desire, and yet I am not contented. Perhaps I may feel better, and get stronger, if I can but learn to forget myself for awhile; and I think my best chance of this lies in making Marguerite, who never thought of herself at all, only of me—and you, who have always been good to me—happy together."

She leant back in the wicker chair in which she was resting, and a heavenly smile played upon her features as she took my hand and her sister's and joined them in a tender clasp. Marguerite did not attempt any resistance, but her tears fell fast. I, too, felt a difficulty in restraining mine as I gazed upon that young creature.

Blanche was far more beautiful than ever, and the blue eyes which when I first met their gaze had been limpid and vacant, were now full of ex-



pression; but their rapt eloquence, and the holy light on her soft brow, were more of heaven than earth. She had won a soul through love and anguish, but I feared for her life.

I did not stay long, for she was soon tired; but Marguerite walked back with me—not the shortest way, for it wound round over a corner of the Moorlands within view of the Peak. We did not cross the brook, which now rippled like gold through the meadows, and would scarcely have offered any difficulty, even at the point where, in the stormy spring floods, it had nearly covered the stepping-stones. Lingered at every stile, full of sweet lovers' fancies, we made the way longer than it need have been; and yet when that walk was over, a thing of the past, never to be repeated exactly, never to be forgotten by either of us, it seemed to have been much too short. When Marguerite said she must return to her sister, I went back with her, of course; but, like all things good or evil, that walk, at last, came to an end.

Blanche seemed, as she anticipated, to rally under the influence of the perfect happiness of the next few weeks. There was no one to prohibit our engagement. Marguerite was of age, and her own mistress; and if she chose to think me worthy of the priceless gift of her love, nobody had the right to forbid the banns which were put up weekly at the fine old Norman Church where as



man and boy I had worshipped with Aunt Jessica; and, since her death, alone.

Marguerite wrote to her nominal guardian, Lord Maskelyne, informing him of her engagement; and I communicated with my only near relatives, Uncle George and Jessie, inviting them to come and visit me at my farm, and to witness my marriage, which would take place shortly. I would leave the place entirely at their disposition during our honeymoon, and hoped they would be there to welcome us back from our travels.

Uncle George accepted my invitation at once, and wished me joy heartily; but declined to bring Jessie, and said that on her account his visit must be brief. She would stay at the Hall during his absence, with Lady Nairn, who was every day becoming fonder of her. Jessie was wrapt up in the Countess, and would be the better for her society; as she was a thoroughly good pious woman, with more sense in her little finger than he feared his little maid would ever be able to boast of. The fishing had been good since I left Birklands, and he had enjoyed it more than he had done anything since he was a boy, or ever had expected to like anything again. As for the farming, he was afraid he had not seen to it properly. His heart had been with his rod and line. He was half afraid sometimes that he had lost it over again, as he did once before when he



was a Highland lad, in the deep pond at the head of the stream under the old willow.

I felt very thankful to my cousin Jessie for the lessons in French which she had given me at Birklands. Marguerite and her sister talked together in their native tongue, and sometimes made merry over some of my blunders; but still they encouraged me to persevere, and with the courtesy inherent in foreigners, declared that I had a good accent. It was pleasant, whatever gave rise to it, to see a smile on Blanche's lips. She was generally very grave and silent. Marguerite, I could easily perceive, was very anxious about her adopted sister.

Our engagement afforded her great pleasure.

"Ah, Harry!" she said, one day, "if I had been brought up at the old French Farm-house, and wedded to a brave Norman peasant-farmer, it might have made me happier. I should not have troubled myself as I have lately done about things that, after all, are of no consequence to an ailing girl like me. Frank might have done far better if he had never seen me. What a useless wife I should make him, even if I were ever well and strong enough to wed him, and go to his far-away home in the South. But I shall never leave the Manor House."

I strove in vain to convince her that these were morbid fancies, dangerous to indulge in; because such superstitious fears, brooded upon idly,



might incapacitate her for the real duties of life. Blanche smiled again, but much more sadly, when I prophesied that the time would come when I should visit her, and see how they managed farming in South Hampshire; and we should laugh at her fears, after she had become a rosy, matronly body, quite able to guide the feminine department of a busy life.

"We shall see which of us is the true prophet," she said, softly. "First of all, I hope I shall never cease to regret that we are not really sisters—the French sisters, as you called us on that happy evening when you sheltered us under your roof. My father meant it kindly, but it was a great pity that he should have taken me into society under what I cannot help seeing now were false pretences. If Frank had known all about me from the first, he would never have wooed and won me."

No eloquence but his own could persuade her that by marrying her, Frank Ducie would not injure his prospects, and place her and himself in a false position; and even his flatteries and ardent assurances had of late failed to convince her. Absence had been judged best for a time, till the excitement, caused by the discovery she had unfortunately made, had cooled down; and the feverish irritation had not yet subsided. Truly, the sins of the fathers are visited on the innocent children. It seemed impossible to obliterate the



evil memories of the past, or to live them down.

Madelon told me that Lord Maskelyne absolutely worshipped the frail girl whose life had always hung by so slight a tenure that it was difficult to foretell what might be the effect of her present inquietude. I do not think that the honest, clear-sighted Frenchwoman cared very much for the young lover.

He was terribly thoughtless, she said—light as thistle-down or gossamer; and the separation from his betrothed was a trial of his constancy which she hoped he might bear—but for her part she wished her darling had chosen differently.

I could not bring myself to say a word in the young man's favour. From the moment when I saw him cantering over the Moors, as I imagined, in the character of Marguerite's successful wooer, I had taken a dislike to him. It might be prejudice at first, but circumstances had strengthened the unfavourable impression. I detested the selfish flirtations which, in his own rank and sphere, often pass for mere harmless amusement. When I thought of our fresh Border rose, still pale from his desertion—her first and best feelings slighted—her bright nature quenched—I hated the idle sport more than ever. I doubted whether Frank Ducie and I ever could be friends, and I hoped that our lot in life might not throw us too often together.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

“Oh! the light of life that sparkled  
In those bright and beauteous eyes!  
Oh! the blush of happy beauty,  
Tell-tale of the heart's surprise!  
Oh! the radiant light that girdled  
Field and forest, land and sea,  
When we all were young together,  
And the earth was new to me.”

AYTOUN.

LORD MASKELYNE answered Marguerite's letter in person, arriving quite unexpectedly at the Manor House on the same day which brought Uncle George to my farm. Many years had elapsed since they had seen each other, and in the interval Mr. Forbes had entertained hard thoughts of my neighbour. But he was a Christian man, ready to forgive; and there had been a time wherein, you see, they were friends. His Lordship, on his part, was too much a man of the world to stand doggedly on trifles, nor had he any motive for blaming my Uncle. They met as



old friends, and at first not a word was said of the long bygone past.

Marguerite's guardian had always been to her kind and faithful. On such an auspicious occasion as her marriage, he could not neglect, he said, an important trust, though I never could exactly make out by whom it had been laid upon him. He gave his hearty acquiescence to my proposals, so there was no need to question his nominal authority. I would much rather that he had not insisted on giving her a handsome portion; but, at all events, I made him settle it strictly for her own use. I could not, neither could Marguerite, refuse it without ungraciousness; and Blanche's pleasure in her being treated as a sister of her own, lessened our reluctance. Nothing could be kinder or more flattering than Lord Maskelyne's manner to myself. He had always professed, I believe sincerely, to like me, and he considered Marguerite's prospects as safe in my keeping.

Gradually the two men, so utterly dissimilar in character, but with many old associations clinging to their memories, became constant companions. When I missed my guest, I was nearly sure to find him at the Hall, where, as may be imagined, I was a frequent visitor; or idly following the course of the stream in which our Lord of the Manor had given him full liberty to fish. His Lordship was not a lover of the angle, but he would watch with interest my Uncle's keen



enjoyment of the sport and skilful cast of the line.

One day, after dinner, to which Mr. Forbes had returned somewhat late—his habits of rigid punctuality had certainly altered—my Uncle told me that Lord Maskelyne had for the first time alluded to the assistance rendered to him in his days of debt and difficulty. He had not known to what extent he had been indebted to the former Master of Birklands till, in looking over some family papers, he had found out the old claim, and now he wished to make matters straight. Since he had inherited his English kinsman's property, he had lived principally abroad, and not attended as he should have done to business; but he meant now to settle at home, and, though he regretted that his carelessness on many points had caused suffering and sorrow, he trusted it was not "too late to mend."

"Aye, aye; easily said, my Lord! He's a capital hand at talking, Harry; and always could make the best of a bad cause—the worse appear the better reason," continued my Uncle. "I can't help liking him when we're together, and seeing things as he sees them, though, in the long days past and gone, more than one home has been blighted by his light ways of thinking and acting. But there is no good in bearing ill-will for ever. Life's aye too short and sorrow-fraught for ran-



cour; so I've forgiven him, and he seems really anxious in some sort to make restitution."

Mr. Forbes was silent for several minutes. His grave, kind brow was overclouded with thought. I did not interrupt his meditations.

"One of the worst sins he has to answer for was driving his poor young sister into that wretched connection. She did it to save her family from utter ruin, and she has paid a fearful price for the sacrifice she made to save her brother from a prison. He winced when I told him how it had changed her from the blithe, bonnie lassie I remembered her being. *That* made him feel; but he takes all things lightly, and will soon get over it. I told him I had no want of money now—no difficulties to trammel me—and more than enough to provide for my girl. The old score need not trouble him; but what was harder to wipe off from my memory was the ruin of my boyish happiness, and hopes with regard to his sister. Married or single—though I trusted I had acted up to my duties, and done a man's part in life—I had never forgotten her. What Nellie Ducie had been to me in childhood, boyhood, youth, and early manhood, there was no need to say, for he alone of all men knew it well. What Eleonora, Countess of Nairn, was to me still, though to others she might seem worn with much sorrow and care, I could scarcely venture to express; but, Harry, I told him plainly that, if



the devotion of what was still left to me of life, added to the purest love of earlier years, could win her, I meant to make her my wife yet."

"And what was his answer?" I said, with a firm pressure of the manly hand which, in the excitement of speaking, my Uncle extended to me. "Much of my future opinion of Lord Maskelyne will depend on his reply to your honest avowal."

"Oh, he behaved very much like a gentleman," said Mr. Forbes. "You won't easily take him by surprise. He said there was not a man in England or Scotland he should prefer for a brother-in-law, if his sister still retained what he believed to have been a very strong early preference for the lad who had been the best shot, and the hardest rider, in their old neighbourhood. He had been almost entirely separated from her since her marriage. No one could regret that fatal event more than himself, or desire more deeply to atone for any share he might have had in bringing it about. Nellie was only too unselfish, and had been made the martyr for the family error of extravagance. It was not himself alone:—I must remember what Craigie Hall was in our boyhood. The estate was encumbered with debt, and everyone went his own way, and spent what he liked, though the exchequer was empty. When the crisis came, of course the weakest went to the wall. Poor dear Nellie! She was now, as she had always been, as good as an angel—and as



beautiful! If I could win her to relinquish her widow's weeds, his Lordship added earnestly, no one would rejoice more than he should; and it would greatly simplify matters with regard to the debt so long ignored, which now seemed to weigh so heavily on his conscience. As her husband had been barbarous enough to say that she would forfeit her dower on re-marrying, he should make the sum in question her portion if she decided in favour of her earliest suitor.

"She will not be a Countess nor a wealthy widow long, if I have my way," had been my Uncle's reply. "Honourable by name and nature she must always be; but if I am not very much mistaken the title of Countess will be laid aside as unregretfully as the riches which bought her maiden freedom and light-heartedness. For the rest, if I am a successful wooer, I will not oppose your Lordship's desire to make atonement for what has gone before, and I thank you heartily for the goodwill and friendliness which for the sake of Auld Lang Syne you have shown to me."

My Uncle's straight-forward earnestness and sincere piety gave him great influence over the melancholy girl who was so intense an object of interest to us all. For the first time Blanche seemed to feel that it was a sin to encourage the morbid fancies which interfered so cruelly with duty. However much there might be in the past



which needed forgiveness and forgetfulness, our part was to deal with the present and prepare for the future. Man of the world and lover of pleasure as her father had hitherto been, a very serious responsibility rested upon her now. This might be the turning-point in his character; and in her feeble hands might even now rest the power of leading him on in a fresher, truer, nobler course, or of casting him adrift on the tumultuous ocean, without rudder or compass.

The same arguments applied to her future husband, whose disregarded claims ought to weigh on her conscience, my Uncle urged; not having known his fickleness on a former occasion, and judging by his impetuous demands to be reconciled to his betrothed bride. Did she mean to turn these good impulses to evil—to disregard the love which had surrounded her from her birth, as well as that which Providence had bestowed on her as one of the most precious gifts a woman could receive—a man's true warm affection; the sincere desire to make her future life happy? Might not this also be her father's best chance of peace and tranquillity in his declining years, leading him to a better home in Heaven than even the most loving offices of the most dutiful child could provide for him on earth?

My Uncle was quite ignorant what a share Frank Ducie's careless flatteries and idle gallantry had had in quenching the bright light in his own



darling's eyes, and paling her cheeks; or he could scarcely have pleaded the absent one's cause so well as he did with his promised bride. The colour flushed and faded on Blanche's cheek as she listened in respectful silence.

When she told me what had passed between them, I sincerely rejoiced in his ignorance and hers of the worst feature with which I was acquainted in her young lover's career. He might, and I hoped would, turn out a brave true man yet; and I joined my entreaties heartily with those of my Uncle, that the would not risk their happiness and try his patience too sorely by prolonged absence.

Blanche did not at present consent to his recall, and he was left to ruminate over the past, present, and future for a while; but Marguerite, my domestic angel that was to be, wrote to him encouragingly. Blanche was decidedly calmer and better, though all excitement was still to be deprecated on her account. When the quiet ceremony, fixed for the following week, was over, Lord Maskelyne meant to take his daughter abroad, and a meeting could be arranged with less fear of disturbing her excitable temperament than would be the case if he came to the Manor House. She was certain that Blanche missed his tender care, and longed for their re-union. It was only on his account that she felt so deeply the sorrows of her past. Now that she was becoming stronger



in health. it would be easier to reason with her, and to prove to her that the prolongation of their present unavoidable separation would inflict needless punishment on them both.



## CHAPTER XXIV.

"Heaven hath its crown of stars, the earth  
Her glory-robe of flowers;  
The sea its gems, the grand old woods  
Their songs and greening showers;  
The birds their homes, where leaves and blooms  
In beauty wreath above;  
High-yearning hearts their rainbow dreams,  
And we, sweet—we have love."

MASSEY.

DO not believe that since St. Wilfrid laid its firm foundation the old Norman Church in which Marguerite and I were wedded ever held a happier bridal pair. I cannot attempt to describe my pearl among women on this thrice blessed occasion. All I know is she was clad in spotless white from head to foot, with some light shimmering gauzy drapery floating round her, festooned here and there by a bunch of daisies. Round her fair neck was a string of pearls, Lord Maskelyne's gift—her only ornament excepting the guard-ring and a brooch, also of pearls—my gift and Blanche's. But what matters it how she was dressed, when without and within she was all purity and loveliness?



We did not return to the Manor House, but parted from our friends at the church-door. Too much excitement, too many leave-takings, were not good for our poor little sister. As it was, when Marguerite tore herself from that fond, clinging embrace, I was glad to hurry her away; and Blanche, as she stood in the shade of the ancient portal, looked like a drooping lily, well-nigh drowned in a thunderstorm, but most beautiful. In her white dress she seemed more like a bride of heaven, a sainted votaress, than a woman whom that *vaurien* Frank Ducie would ever call his wife.

I had promised that we would spend a few days at Birklands on our way back from the Scottish lakes and mountains, where we spent our happy honeymoon. I wanted to see the country which Scott has immortalised; and, with the "Lady of the Lake" for our guide-book—we needed no other—we visited the Trossachs, saw Ellen's Isle, and the spot where the noble stag stood at bay. Never shall I forget that tour. My busy life had afforded hitherto scant time for recreation. Now I had by my side one who could raise my dull work-a-day thoughts into sublimity, and make a hymn of praise of each glorious summer morning and evening.

For the first time I learned now with rapture that even as I had loved my fair bride from the moment when, in my boyhood, she had bathed my forehead as I lay in the carriage with that



handkerchief still preserved among my choicest relics, Marguerite had felt kindly towards me. Not, of course, anything resembling my boyish worship, but with a sweet, angelic tenderness which had gradually ripened into love when we met again in after years. She had never regarded me quite as the rustic hind I feared she must have thought me, but had looked on me as one simple and true, and worthy of a woman's love. Need I say that I firmly resolved she should never find herself mistaken?

Jessie received us with sisterly warmth, and my Uncle with the love of a parent. How well I remembered, when I saw the father and daughter standing together on the threshold, the different feelings with which I had first drawn near to the home of my kindred; when I fancied myself, but for their kind reception, alone in the world. What pride and joyfulness filled my heart as I led Marguerite up the straight path between the old-fashioned borders, and up to the lintel, where Uncle George kissed her, and Jessie at once embraced her. My cousin was less shy and much graver than formerly. About her whole appearance and manners hung, like a graceful mantle, the shadow of womanliness and self-renunciation. My Uncle looked younger and brighter than when I had seen him in his own home, weighed down by anxious solicitude about his daughter. It was quite wonderful, he said, what an improvement had



taken place in her during his absence; principally owing, he thought, to the Countess's loving care and sensible advice. In health she was much stronger, and so active and serviceable that he should be left sorely at a loss when the time came, which he supposed was not far off, when somebody would want to rob his home of its chief treasure.

It was true, he added, with a sigh, that he missed a certain pretty girlishness—a light, merry way which his darling had before she was ill, the time I was with them during the great heat in the early summer. That showed him that she was not a child any longer—a woman now—which reminded him that he must ere long expect to part with her. He did not care how long it might be before that came to pass. Happen what would, the place to him would never be quite the same without Jessie.

They were indeed, for the present, apparently, all in all to each other; and I could not help fearing that any change, however desirable in some respects, would cause fresh suffering to the girl, who now seemed bound up heart and soul in her father. I did not myself think that she would marry—certainly there was no probability of it at present. In after years, if she found herself less indispensable at home, the good daughter might accept some worthier suitor than the young student at the Hall had proved himself. But now love



had been put aside—crushed ruthlessly; and it is a flower which, in some soils, never lifts its head again—in others, not less faithful to the trust confided to them, it may blossom again later on, but seldom with the same bloom and brightness.

We spent the following day by invitation from Lady Nairn at Craigie Hall. There was no longer any difficulty on my Uncle's side about re-entering the old haunts of his youth. It almost seemed to have come back to him, and to be revived in the presence of the gentle lady who had been its guiding star. He took the place to which she invited him silently at the foot of the table, as if it belonged to him, and was quite at ease there. The glad light in his eyes as he gazed at the woman who had won his first affections, showed that she had kept through all changes that place in his heart belonging to the first beloved, which no changes, neither time nor death itself, can re-fill. It was true that, like many another man or woman, Uncle George had for a time seemed faithless. He had married, children had been born to him, and he had performed his duties in both relations faithfully; but no one—neither wife nor child—had taken *her* place; and I believe, though I could not read her heart as well, for the widowed Countess's manner was subdued and quiet, that in her inmost heart of hearts, as maid, wife, and widow, the initials carved beside her own on the trunk of the old



willow would, if she had died, have been found engraved indelibly.

Jessie was quite prepared to take the second place in her father's household.

"They will want me, Harry, that's one comfort," she said, with a rather sad smile, as we were on our way home, following Marguerite and her father by the winding path through the plantation, well out of earshot. "Lady Nairn will never make a good useful farmer's wife—how should she? But I've learnt thoroughly to understand my work now, and to like it. There will be plenty of room for us both in father's large tender heart."

I commended her for her unselfishness, and asked if she thought the matter was settled between the principal parties.

"Oh, aye; they understand each other perfectly," she replied. "There's not a doubt about it. As soon as father came back from your wedding he went straight up to the Hall, where I was staying; and yet by some chance I was not just in the way at first. He came across her, and I can't say exactly what passed between them, but he's been a different man since. And she, too, though she still looks sad and grave, I think she's happier. When her second year of widowhood is over, they'll just marry quietly, and he'll bring her home. She will not be the Countess, but plain Mrs. Forbes—or just, may be, the Honour-



able; but there'll be no pomp and state, not even so much as at your quiet wedding, which father told me went off so pleasantly. But Harry, I'm sorry for your wife's sister, Mademoiselle Blanche, and for *him* too," she added, with an effort. "When is she going to get better and make him happy? I thought of them so much the day you were married, and wondered why the two sisters did not stand together at the altar."

"That must be left for the future to decide, Jessie," I answered, gravely, I am sure, for I did not share her feeling. "It seems to me very doubtful whether these young lovers understood each other as perfectly as those of whom we have been speaking. Blanche is very delicate. It would need a very tender, thoughtful care to keep her from sufferings even greater than have yet been laid upon her; and Mr. Ducie has not proved himself, to my mind, equal to the charge. I am not at all sure, if you ask me to tell you the truth, that I desire, or think it right, that they should marry."

"Oh, you'd not be so cruel as to wish to part them!" said Jessie, colouring and quivering with indignant emotion. "You're my cousin and friend, almost my brother, now I've lost the two brave lads that never let harm come near me; and you are angry because he said some poor foolish words to me, of which at the time I thought more than I ought to have done. But that's all



over long since, and what harm they did me has passed by too. Nay, more, it has done me great good. I'd not be the woman I am now, strong and capable, and above having silly jealousies about father, though I love him so dearly, if that trouble had not fallen upon me. It was God's will that brought it, and I can kiss the rod, and thank Him for this and all His mercy. You never did Mr. Frank justice. Now he loves this young lady truly; he will be a fine brave man yet, and I'll live to see it, and joy in their bliss. Promise me that you will not go against him."

"Indeed I will, Jessie, and you may be right," I answered, conquered by her womanly magnanimity; "at all events I will hope for the best, and not interfere in any way; of that you may rest confident. In this matter I should dread having any responsibility."

Jessie was forced to be content with this assurance. She did not press the point further, nor was it again alluded to during our short but pleasant stay at Birklands.

Bright and brief as the early morning hours, when each blade of grass and opening flower glitters with dew, had been her own season of bliss, but it was past recall. As a modern poet has truly said, in words which I heard her repeating softly, as she went about her pleasant household labours:



"Call back the dew  
     That on the rose at morn was lying;  
 When the day is dying,  
     Bid the sunbeam stay;  
 Call back the wave,  
 E'en while the ebbing tide's receding;  
 Oh! all unheeding  
     Of thy voice are they!  
 As vain the call  
     Distraction makes on love departed;  
 When the broken-hearted  
     Bitter tears let fall.  
 Dew and sunshine, wave and flower,  
 Renewed, return at destined hour;  
 But never yet was known the power  
 Could vanished love recall.\*"

Whilst Jessie was instructing Marguerite in some domestic matters, and perhaps getting a hint herself from my clever wife respecting the French way of managing dairy and kitchen, I took a walk through the Birch-wood, where I had spent some melancholy hours in the spring, when I little hoped to bring her with me as my bride the next time I crossed the Border. I could scarcely believe in my own good fortune, and longed to extend it to all my kindred.

Thus musing, by no means sadly, I came in sight of the old willow; but I did not approach it, for under its shade, with fishing-rod and basket lying idle on the bank, I saw two figures. There was no need to disturb them, for at a distance I

\* Charles Dickens.



recognised the Countess of Nairn and my Uncle. They were standing just by the tree on whose trunk, half-hidden by the encroaching ivy, I had seen their initials inscribed.

As I walked slowly homewards, wondering whether Jessie would really be as well satisfied as she professed to be with part of the affection which for a long time had been all her own, Mr. Forbes overtook me. There was a bright light in his eye, a more elastic tread as he walked by my side than formerly; and though he was quite unconscious that I had seen him and the Countess together, he at once began speaking about her. She had been much touched, he told me, by her brother's kind messages, and freely forgave him. Indeed she had done so long ago, unasked, and had gone to him when he asked her to befriend his innocent child; but the past had been as a sealed book between them. She was glad that he felt at last how grievously he had wronged her and others, and thrown away his own best chances of happiness.

"That gave me an opening, Harry, and I dashed in awkwardly enough at once, saying that I was not minded to be so foolish; and whether she did not think, even at the eleventh hour, it was best to try to retrieve time lost. I wish you had seen how bonnie she looked, with the blush I so well remembered stealing over her soft cheeks;



but she said, gravely, there were lives so completely darkened, even before that late hour, nothing could restore their brightness — hearts that had ceased to beat for joy for themselves, and only knew it for others.

“I told her that I had thought once as she did, when my brave boys died, and my Jessie seemed like to follow them; but that was past, and I believed even for me there might be happiness in store if she would listen to me: but if she bade me be silent, I would never trouble her more. She did not speak one word, Harry; so I took heart, and told her, as I had done her brother, that I had never loved any woman as I loved her. In youth she had been the one particular star, shining above me it is true, but not quite out of my sphere; and now, a man of middle age, but not old, she appeared fairer and dearer than ever. Oh, the sweet, sad smile that came about her pretty mouth then! and she tried to speak and contradict me, but now I would not listen, or stay my suit. When she had heard all I had to say she might answer, but not before; and, as we talked together, for her as for me, the old time came back. She did not look upon me as the staid man ye see in me, but as the handsome laddie who had wrapped her many a time in his plaid on the way back from merry gatherings, where they had footed it on the braes together, and she had been his blithest partner.”



I did not wonder that the Countess's thoughts had flown back to former days; for, though not to be called a bonnie, winsome laddie, there was the light of love and hope in George Forbes' face, making it very pleasant to look upon.

"She told me," he added, "more of her troubles than she had ever named before, and confessed that one part came of our old liking for each other. There was a bit of gold, a wee locket with a ring of brown hair inside it, which I had given her on her birthday, and she aye wore it. One day her husband spied it, and took it from her, and she couldn't keep from crying, and said it was the best thing she had to remind her of the days that were gone; but she wouldn't tell whose gift it was, so he just trampled it under foot in his passion. It felt as though her heart was being ground to powder by the trampling. When she said that, Harry, with another of her girlhood's blushes, I knew that she had loved me well—as well as I had loved her in those bygone days—and she didn't deny it. She could never tell an untruth, not if it was to save her life from that tyrant; and why should she begin with one that would grieve me? So we just took our lives in our own hands, and then gave them to each other, wasted away as they were, more's the pity; and resolved to begin again as nearly as we could where the story was cut short in our youth. That is all that there is to say about it. All rests now with



the good God who made us—and I believe 'twas for each other—and first put the true love in our hearts; and, after many breaks and erasures, has given us the power to wind up the history like one of the old tales in the fairy-book—'So they were joined together, and lived happily ever afterwards.'"

I congratulated him heartily, and we were still talking of his future prospects when Jessie and Marguerite came to meet us, having seen our approach, my cousin said, from the window of the sitting-room, which overlooked the path by the lake-side.

I thought of the days when music, floating over the loch, had been heard from the upper-chamber window to which she pointed; and of the red sunset light flooding the river, and flushing Jessie's pale cheek, while she told me of her sorrow. That time was past; and if it had taken away the maiden's buoyant spirits, it had given her the woman's steadfast purpose and winning grace. My Uncle passed his arm tenderly round her, and they went up to the house together, talking about household matters, while I followed with my pearl, my daisy, Marguerite.

We had no secrets now, and I told her for the first time, without allowing any prejudices I might entertain to colour the narrative, the influence which Frank Ducie had for a time exercised over my young cousin. It would not have been



possible for me to conceal it from her, and Jessie had won a place in her heart already. It was best that she should know as much as I did of the character of the man on whom her sister's happiness depended; and very soon Blanche would have to decide her own fate. It would scarcely be fair to keep her in suspense much longer. Marguerite listened gravely, and said some womanly words of sympathy for the girl whose first feelings of love had been so completely thrown away. She thought that Frank had not intended to deceive her, but had been led on by her beauty and simplicity, unconscious of the mischief his idle gallantry might occasion. His love, she was sure, had been entirely given to Blanche; and she still hoped, as she had always done, that they might be happy together.

I was less sanguine, but I did not wish to darken her joyous anticipations. Though Blanche had recovered her serenity, I did not think—I never had thought—that she ought to marry; nor did I believe Frank Ducie possessed the firmness or the equanimity of temper and steadfast principles necessary for her guidance, and to secure their united happiness. It was a relief to turn the conversation, and tell her what had passed between my Uncle and myself. There are, though I consider them exceptions, second marriages holy and sacred as first unions; and the one in question, quietly solemnised six months later, between



George Forbes and Eleonora Ducie, Countess of Nairn—riveting the links forged in early youth, and sundered by circumstances—came exactly under this head.



## PART THE SEVENTH.

### BLANCHE.

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#### CHAPTER XXV.

"A sacred burden is this life ye bear,  
Look on it, lift it, bear it solemnly,  
Stand up and walk beneath it steadfastly,  
Fail not for sorrow, falter not for sin,  
But onward, upward, till the goal ye win."

FRANCES ANNE KEMBLE.

BLANCHE had borne the separation from Marguerite better than we expected, but her joy at our return was very touching. There was a sweet serenity in her manner which afforded hope for the future, and made us look more confidently forward to the re-establishment of her health, and the composure of her nervous temperament. She had conquered the reluctance which at one time prevented her assuming her proper position, and was now the acknowledged mistress of the Manor House. Madelon had quite resolved never to lose sight of her darling, and apparently forgotten her promise



to help us at the Farm. She was completely established as housekeeper and lady's-maid at the mansion.

My gentle wife, who had always liked him, was full of compassion for Frank Ducie, whose letters were becoming more pressing. As yet these urgent entreaties, that he might be allowed to plead his own cause, had not been communicated to Blanche. Lord Maskelyne had judged it best to await our return, and I thought he was right. Nothing had occurred during our absence calculated to disturb her tranquillity; but it now became a question whether she ought not to be informed that her young lover was very impatient for their reunion.

The plan mentioned before of a meeting abroad was perhaps the least likely to agitate Blanche prejudicially, as it might appear to be brought about accidentally; but for the first time in his life Lord Maskelyne seemed wedded to his home. His hitherto desultory, purposeless, wandering mode of life was absolutely distasteful to him.

He was much interested in the new style of farming, carried out scientifically and with every prospect of success by Farmer Holt's successor. People came from far and near to see and take hints from the model buildings, and improved method of feeding cattle and cultivating crops. I myself had ventured upon some experiments, and his Lordship was as enthusiastic about sheep and



oxen and turnips as at different periods of his versatile career he had been about race-horses, yachting, and travelling.

"After a certain time of life, Harry, there's nothing like home," he said, sentimentally, one evening when the two sisters were together in the Manor House garden, now in admirable order, and we were returning after a long inspection of the Model Farm. "Especially when a man has given hostages to fortune, and has a lovely woman to pour out his tea; not but what it is a beverage I hate and seldom care to take, but it is the sort of thing to have on the table when one goes in for domestic life in England. A lady never looks better than when she is presiding over the unin-ebriating cups. That Russian mixture is better: a Samovar—a slice of lemon—sounds well this crushingly hot weather; though I must confess, practically I prefer a cooling claret-cup or iced champagne. For my part, if that young fellow gets tired of waiting, I shall not break my heart. He's not half good enough for her. What is your opinion of Frank Ducie?"

I could not profess any very high estimation of the young man, but I did not choose to encourage Lord Maskelyne's somewhat selfish views.

"I know very little," I replied, "of Mr. Ducie—not enough to offer any suggestion; but the family with whom he resided whilst in my Uncle's



neighbourhood spoke of him highly and seemed fond of him."

"Marguerite wants me to end the matter, and as she phrases it, make the lovers happy," said his Lordship, looking round him complacently. "Upon my word, Harry, I think it would be hard times for me to take any steps to bring about what will make my home once more a desert. I use the word advisedly, and to express strong reprobation. It is one thing to be mounted on your Arab steed and stretching across the sandy waste, unfastening your saddle-bags and ungirthing the noble animal when you come to a spring; even sleeping under the stars—*les belles étoiles*—may be pleasant enough for a season! But I shudder at the idea of a desert when it is literally and metaphorically brought home to you—to your very door as an Englishman—in the shape of a country-house like this, as I have often returned to it, occupied only by servants! I fled from it on the spur of the moment, or rather of necessity. I give you my word, I could not have stopped a fortnight here for any consideration. But now, you'll not believe me, but I assure you I positively *like* the Manor House. As long as the fine weather lasts, under existing circumstances, I *wish* to stop here. Nay, even in autumn and winter, I believe I could take my gun and enjoy myself among the turnips; and I feel a strong curiosity as to the result of our farming experiments. And



these really praiseworthy inclinations are all to be set on one side—given up, in fact—for once uproot me, and I cannot in the least tell whether I shall ever be set down again comfortably among my lares and penates—just to give these young people an opportunity of meeting: and the upshot of it will be that those very household gods will be shattered to pieces, and I shall have to become a wanderer on the face of the earth without aim or object!”

Lord Maskelyne looked round regretfully on his rose-bushes and emerald green turf, on the moat, now cleared from weeds, and the urns filled with summer's brightest blossoms, the tall trees arching overhead, and the grey old Manor House, clustered over with flowering creepers, with ~~two fair women~~ regarding us from the deep-set casement window of the library.

“Let us go in-doors and make the most of this pleasant companionship while we are allowed to enjoy it,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I cannot bear to think what this place would be without Blanche. I do believe she is getting fond of me again. She is an angel and has forgiven me, I know, but even Christianity cannot always make us love an evil-doer. Still, it softens judgment, and in time pity ensues, and to that love is near kin. I believe I could make her happy with me—happier than that thoughtless young fellow. I don't think, Harry, though she's charm-



ing as a daughter, that she is quite fit to be a wife; and he is not exactly the man to understand dealing with such a sensitive plant. He was rash and inconsiderate even as a lover, and she will not bear rough handling—my delicate Provence-Rose—my lily of the garden, my dear little Blanche.”

The lip which was sometimes sarcastic, sometimes haughty, trembled with genuine emotion. Lord Maskelyne broke off the conversation abruptly, and we went into the house. I felt inclined to agree with him, when I saw the tact with which he treated our pretty sister; and Blanche responded to his tenderness, and gay yet soothing attentions. The evening passed pleasantly without any reference to the absent one chafing under the decree of banishment. I do not know what thoughts might be bidden under the smooth serenity of Blanche's aspect, but Marguerite told me, as we walked home together, that she had tried to approach the subject, but that her little sister shrank from any allusion even to the proposed expedition to the Continent, which had been broached to her. She did not wish, she said, for any change, she was feeling better and happier than she had done for a long time, at the Manor House; now that Marguerite was settled at the Farm under the Birches she had not a wish ungratified.

Need I say, if this was the case with our versatile neighbour and the girl whose prospects



had seemed all at once overshadowed by the dark cloud which obscured her earlier years, and now threatened to return, how completely I had realised the perfect sense of earthly bliss? Marguerite was satisfied with our homely mode of life; had even confessed that she had long looked forward to sharing my lot. She would not admit that I was unworthy of my present happiness—of her deep love. No one, she said, had ever been to her as dear as the “untutored hind,” as I persisted in calling myself, who had treated her so rudely at the stepping-stones—almost allowing her to fall into the water when she had asked him to help her across.

Many a time did we visit the Haggisthorn together, and certainly the demons who were said to haunt the Peak exercised no evil influence over our destiny. Marguerite shared my toils, and cares and joys, and all were lightened or enhanced by her sweet society. Our fields, now more promising, under a better system of cultivation, lay all around us; our poultry, our dairy, our bees, under her especial superintendence were as widely farmed, and as profitable in proportion to their numbers, as in dear Aunt's Jessica's days. I never forgot, and Marguerite had learned from me, to love her.

It was a greater pleasure than ever in those early hours of married life, when the day's work and worry were over, to wander arm in arm over



the Moor—to sit under the shadow or shelter of the great cairn in rain or sunshine; to study the nightly Heaven, like a book, now that I could read its starry characters correctly. Whether the days were bright or dark—if the rough wind swept in our faces those clouds which will gather over the heads of each mortal man or woman, or sunshine streamed over the pastures and hill sides—we were together. Whatever might happen in the future, we set our faces steadfastly to meet it. Even from the first we had our trials—murrain among our flocks and herds—hopes crossed—unfaithful servants; but we went cheerfully on our way. Under any events which we could foresee we knew that the bond between us would only be riveted more closely. The love which had first quickened our pulses in the mist under Haggisthorn would endure as long as and yet beyond our earthly lives. Perfected by suffering, purified in death, that affection would go with us to the world beyond the Moor, which now, helped onward and upward as on angels' wings by a good true woman's support and sympathy, seemed nearer than of yore.



## CHAPTER XXVI.

"The world goes up and the world goes down,  
And sunshine follows the rain;  
And yesterday's sneer and yesterday's frown  
Can never come over again,  
Sweet wife,—  
No, never come over again."

CHARLES KINGSLEY.

LORD MASKELYNE'S interest in farm and garden lasted longer than I anticipated. In truth he was an older man, and the rest afforded by his quiet home life suited him better than it had ever done before. Besides this, his love for his gentle companion grew stronger day by day. Without a perceptible effort Blanche had fixed her father's roving heart.

The question of foreign travel was quite laid aside, and Frank Ducie's fate was also left in abeyance. It would have needed a more patient nature than he possessed to stand the trial. How it might have been ended if he had been content to bide his time I cannot say, but he was not so minded. Suspense was hateful to his impetuous



nature, and one day he bore down upon us, as we thought at first, like a thunderstorm in harvest, threatening devastation to our quiet Borderland. I was helping Blanche to make an aviary, where the birds might take shelter in the coming winter, a fancy she had long entertained. Of late she had gone back to the innocent pursuits and amusements of her life at Stonelands, and enlisted me, as then, in her service. I was once more her slave, and every unoccupied moment of my busy days was consecrated willingly to her amusement. Marguerite was never happier than when she saw little Blanche tyrannising over me, and making me waste my time.

We were twining the flexible branches of a honey-suckle in and out among the bars of the birds' winter home one morning, when, totally unexpected and unannounced, Frank Ducie burst in amongst us. Marguerite tried to keep him back, but Blanche, to our surprise, threw down the scissors and strip of matting which she had been holding for me, and ran to meet him; a bright blush and smile were on her lips, and in her clear blue, innocently beaming eyes no trace of sorrow, remorse, or misgiving. All she said was:

"Oh, Frank, where have you been? What a long time you have kept us waiting for you!"

Frank Ducie, who had come prepared to reproach her, met her smiling greeting with amazement. I saw him start, and look intently into



her untroubled face, as though for the first time awakened to the sense that something was wanting there. Blanche took him by the hand tenderly, and showed him our work, and talked about the robins, finches, and black-birds, like a child exhibiting a new doll's house. There was not one trace of painful feeling, not a single remorseful drawback to her pleasure at seeing her lover again.

I do not think that at the moment she remembered the cause of their separation. Startled, bewildered, yet happy, she surrendered herself to pleasurable emotions, totally unconscious of the pain she was inflicting. We, who knew that tender nature better, would have given her time. Her ideas were few, and came to her slowly. Sometimes one would drive out others, and take entire possession of her being. Now she had forgotten for the moment everything except joy at being re-united.

It is difficult to say at what period exactly the chain, once painfully jarred and dislocated, was hastily caught up, but I imagine that Blanche's thoughts had flown far back beyond the days of courtship and betrothals. Most probably to some pleasant early period of their intercourse, when first he had joined in her pursuits and catered for her amusement. She called me down from the steps I had mounted, and told me that Frank was come at last, and would help



us to finish our work. He was almost as clever and handy as I was; she was not going to say that he surpassed me, because I was the first person who had taught her to love nature and take care of the animals. But he was very very kind, and did not mind what trouble he took to please her, and he was not going away again for a long, long time. Perhaps never! She had missed him so; yes, ever so much! But she had never complained. Of course, he was tired! People could not always be spending their time in amusing her. I was often busy, but she was quite contented.

All the time she ran on talking fluently but somewhat vaguely, with little pauses now and then, and fleeting smiles and blushes, yet entirely unembarrassed, Frank was gazing at her silently. He had not taken away his hands, both of which she had seized playfully, but he made no further demonstration of attachment. All that he had been brooding over in absence, every misconception or reproach, faded from his thoughts as completely as the past year of her existence seemed to have slipped from Blanche's memory. He was utterly confounded.

What could he say to damp her innocent joy? and yet—and yet—he felt that he would ten thousand times rather have been received with tears and reluctance. Was this smiling, childlike creature—this apparently irresponsible being, from the



shifting sands of whose recollection a high wave seemed to have effaced their long separation, with all the trials he had endured—really the woman he had worshipped and longed to marry? Beautiful as ever—perhaps even more lovely—this was not his Blanche! What had become of his ideal?

Whilst Marguerite talked to her sister, gradually soothing the excitement under which we knew her to be labouring, in spite of her outward calmness, I drew young Ducie, not reluctantly, away. I felt for him very sincerely, and deeply pitied his disappointment. He was very much excited when we were alone together, telling me that he had never before believed what Lord Maskelyne had candidly told him of Blanche's deficiencies. When they first met in Italy, not a trace of feebleness of mind was discernible—only a most touching humility, which had attracted his admiration. If she differed from some of her sex, it was only in the total absence of any feminine affectations, and in her angelic simplicity and unselfishness. She always said that in earlier life she had exacted too much from others, and must now make atonement; but even this he had never believed.

Leaving the poor young fellow to get over as well as he could the shock he had sustained, while he took a walk in the fields, I went to look for Marguerite, whom I regarded as our sheet-anchor in this sea of troubles. She had persuaded Blanche, who was now feeling weak and tired, to



lie down. Madelon was sitting beside her with her work, and she thought she would soon fall asleep.

Both of us felt great anxiety respecting her state of mind when she would awaken from slumber. My wife felt certain that recollection of the past would revive, and with it sorrow and compunction. When a child, Blanche had had lapses of memory like the present one, and the events of months seemed entirely obliterated. Then, like the returning tide, the past would flow back, with penitence for trifling faults, and she would be for a time profoundly sad; though no one could tell whether a sense of mental deficiency mingled with reviving memories. Now that she was a woman, with more than a full share of tenderness and sympathy, her sister feared that her awakening would be intensely painful.

As usual, Marguerite was right. After a deep sleep, Blanche roused herself as from a long, trying dream. She did not at first realise that Frank Ducie was in the house, and that she had seen him, but was full of remorse for his sufferings in absence, and for her own carelessness, as she now considered it, of all he had undergone. She had seen him, she told her sister, in her sleep; and he was quite pale and altered, grieving for their separation. What ought she to do? Sometimes she thought that she might reward him, and make him happy; at other moments a dark cloud hung



between them like a curtain; and, strive as she might, her strength was too feeble to drag away its cumbrous folds.

It was not until late in the following day that Frank was admitted again into Blanche's presence, and she did not receive him, as she had done at first, with smiles and blushes. She had been very ill all the evening, and had passed a sleepless night. Our poor lily looked as if broken by a thunder storm, hanging its head on a frail stalk, blanched and drooping. I think Frank's love revived the moment he saw her in this saddened state. He went quickly across the room towards her couch, for she was much too weak to sit up to receive him. At her particular request Marguerite and I were both present, but we sat apart in one of the deep recesses of the windows together, and took no share in the conversation.

Never, even in her girlish days, had I seen her look more lovely or more fragile. Marguerite, with tender, womanly care, had decked her pale sister almost like a bride, in the dress she had worn for our wedding, purely white, with a bunch of autumn crocus—that delicate lilac meadow-flower, which never seems strong enough to hold up its petals—in her bosom. I think my own dear wife still looked forward to her sister's marriage, and a future happy existence,—believing that prosperous wedded love would strengthen her in mind and frame, and that the sorrows and anxieties of the



past would fly away like a vision of the night. I, however, when I saw our poor, young, beautiful sister so adorned, looked upon her, as I had done on our happy marriage day, at the Bride of Heaven—purified and exalted—too pure, too holy for mortal joys, and much too feeble to bear even the happiest married life, which must bring with it cares to be shared together. She looked like Jephtha's daughter, or Iphigenia, prepared to yield up all earthly pleasure at the will of her Heavenly Father, who, in his Eternal wisdom, had seen fit to afflict her so grievously.

Some thoughts like these were, I am sure, in Frank Ducie's mind when he went close up to his betrothed, and knelt reverently beside her, but did not venture to touch even the white hand which lay on the edge of the sofa.

"Must it be so, Blanche?" he said, quietly. "Do you really wish me to give up my claim to this dear hand. I can scarcely interpret otherwise my overlong banishment."

Blanche did not move. For some seconds she could not speak. At last, just as Marguerite was going to support, and, if necessary, answer for her, she said, softly:

"Do you not see yourself, Frank, how it is with me? There are days, like yesterday, when the past is a blank. Then it all rushes back like a flood, threatening to overwhelm the little wisdom God has given me. My own people know my



weakness, and deal kindly with me—perhaps even love me the better for it. But how should I fare among strangers, as the mistress of a household? Better, far better, let me stay in my winter home, like the little birds I told you about yesterday. Indeed, indeed, my cousin, it is best that those afflicted as I am should creep into their nests, and not attempt flights on which their wings are not strong enough to bear them.”

There were intervals, during which her usually impetuous lover waited sadly and patiently. When she had quite ceased speaking, he said gently:

“You never used to call me ‘Cousin.’”

Blanche’s eyes filled with tears.

“But we *are* cousins and friends. Nothing can change that, Frank. You see, I have learnt to acknowledge and to be grateful for family ties. I am afraid we can never be more than cousins, and I like to think that we shall not be less. Always loving each other. Say you are not angry.”

“No, I am not angry now, only grieved. I cannot quite reconcile myself to my fate. Must it be so, Blanche? May not my love be the appointed help for your recovery? Will it not make you strong and happy? Believe me, it shall not fail you.”

“I am sure you would do your very best to help me,” said Blanche, sadly; “but, Frank, my dear, dear cousin, I cannot answer for myself even from



day to day. It is I, not you, who am deficient. I cannot, I will not, bind you to share my uncertain prospects. I dare not entail upon you what may be in store for me. In faith, in hope, I can endure; but if another's happiness were linked with mine—if, each time I felt weak and forgetful, the dread came upon me that he whom I love must suffer through my lack of principle to resist what, I own, is a temptation—I could not bear it. My father has no fears, and is bound, by the laws of Heaven and Earth, to protect his feeble child. Marguerite is like a sister—Harry always does me good. Surely, I am rich in blessings.”

Overcome with emotions which she struggled to suppress, Blanche lay back on her couch, faint and white. Frank took her hand in his, and pressed it fondly.

“It may be you are right, dear one,” he said, with a sigh. “You are more like an angel than a woman. I dare not argue against such convictions. But if, with returning health and strength, you feel differently, send for me, and I will come to you at once. I can trust entirely to your decision. If it makes you happy—if you are satisfied with my promise, by all means in my power, to guard you from future evil—I will take all risk upon myself. If not—if you fear the future, and can rest more tranquilly in the love which surrounds you now—so be it—I must learn to submit.”

After all, Jessie was right; and I retracted the



unfavourable opinion I had entertained, as I heard Frank's firmly-spoken, melancholy words. I saw that in his inmost heart the contemplated union was now regarded differently; but still, if she wished it, he was ready to keep his troth-plight, and to shelter that stricken blossom to the very utmost of his ability.

Blanche, too, read him aright.

"No, Frank, all is at an end between us, now and for ever. I thank you for your noble trust, but I cannot accept what I know would be a sacrifice. Leave me now, but remember, come what may, we shall always be dear to each other as cousins and friends."

Blanche turned her face to the wall and spoke no more. While Marguerite went across the room to her sister, I drew young Ducie away. He did not resist, but I could perceive that, though reason might be convinced, he gave up his dream of young love very reluctantly.



## CHAPTER XXVIII.

"The shadow pictured in the lake  
By every tree that trembles,  
Is cast for more than just the sake  
Of that which it resembles.

"The dew falls lightly, not alone  
Because the meadows need it;  
But hath an errand of its own  
To human souls that heed it.

"The stars are lighted in the skies  
Not merely for their shining;  
But like the light of loving eyes,  
Have meanings worth divining."

*The Sabbath of the Fields.*

THE autumn wind was rushing through the Manor House trees with a sort of sobbing, sighing vehemence, and now and then brought a scud of rain in our faces. Heavy clouds gathering in the west foreboded a wild, stormy night. It was the time when violent equinoctial gales might be expected.



We took, without discussing the question, the nearest road to my Farm. I felt that it would be better for young Ducie to avoid another meeting with Blanche at present. Friendship and cousinly regard might be all very well in the future, but when people have been lovers, it is not easy at once to fall back upon them. Separation is the only course to be pursued—for some time, at all events. He agreed with me entirely, and took up his quarters for the night at my house willingly. Marguerite remained with her suffering sister, for as such she always regarded her, till a late hour; when I went up to the Mansion and brought her home.

“So that dream is over,” said Frank the next morning, when he was bidding me farewell. “I deserved no better fortune; and yet I cannot bear to part with it. Life will be for a long time a dreary blank, but she is right. Harry, I should never look into her sweet face without fearing to see again that unconsciousness of all I had been enduring, with which she met me yesterday—that innocent, childlike, unreasoning joy, which saddened me more than tears. Tell her that, although it grieves me more than I can express, I acquiesce in her decision. I acknowledge, after a long, weary, sleepless night, that it is better we should part; and I will try and reconcile myself to the idea that, when, years hence, we meet again—if ever



I can bring myself to look upon her lovely face—it will be as friends.”

We shook hands warmly. Presently, however, he said:

“Before I leave your house, I have yet a word or two to say on another subject. It lies heavily on my conscience, and has done so ever since my own hopes were blasted—as by an East wind in springtime—that I cast a shade upon the life of one very near and dear to you. Believe me, it was not done intentionally. Most of us are selfish in happiness, and I was engrossed by mine. Until the moment of parting came—indeed not until after it was over—I never understood the meaning of that sad glance which I met with my heart full of love for another. But it haunted me—I have never forgotten it. I had been idly trifling with feelings of which I never guessed what might be the intensity. Parted for a time from the being I worshipped, I had whiled away the dreary hours in the society of one who deserved better than to be made the object of idle admiration. But my punishment is just. Jessie will forgive and pity me, I know, when she hears that the hopes I confided to her with such selfish carelessness are dashed to the ground—that I am a wanderer without aim or object—for I cannot enter the house to which I once expected to take Blanche as my wife. Tell Lord Maskelyne that I shall go abroad for a time, and try to forget the past; or rather,



I will strive to learn from the sad lesson of experience to be a better and a worthier man."

Blanche bore the trial—none but Marguerite knew how heavy a one it was to her—bravely and quietly. "It was not right that we should marry:"—she said to me, the first time I saw her after young Ducie's departure. "I am glad that he saw it at last. What could I have done to help him on in the world? I know that he is at heart ambitious, and now, with no clog upon his actions, a noble career of usefulness lies before him. He will travel—he will go into Parliament. He will have all sorts of duties as a country gentleman and a magistrate—in time he will marry:—better, far better, that he should be free!"

Very seldom after that day did she speak of her own sorrow. It was never permitted to darken our joy, or to interfere with her father's comfort. She returned, as soon as she was able to exert herself, to her place at the head of his establishment; moving about, sometimes a little dreamily, but always bringing a smile to his lips when she softly drew near him. Not destined, perhaps, as she said uncomplainingly, not fitted to fulfil woman's higher duties as wife and mother, Blanche found her proper sphere in ministering to her father's comfort. Her soothing influence exactly suited his excitable temperament, and he never wearied of



her gentle companionship. Her quiet, unselfish renunciation of all other joys and hopes, put aside from a sense of duty, awakened his strongest admiration; and the reflection of the one great ardently desired happiness which she had resigned so meekly, as soon as she felt that it was not meet she should accept it, seemed to throw a radiant after-glow upon her plaintive loveliness.

“When joy has flashed its brightest hue,  
And sorrow breathed her saddest strain,  
As from a mount life’s path we view,  
And dream again—and dream again.  
Here glimmers childhood’s echoing vale,  
And there is youth’s delicious plain,  
And as each well-known point we hail,  
We dream again—we dream again.”

“I don’t know that I am one bit more worthy of the exquisite happiness of seeing that angel in my house revive and renew her sweet youth in this lovely spring sunshine than Frank Ducie was, but I appreciate it better,” said Lord Maskelyne; as we stood one April day in the following year on the terrace in front of the Manor House together.

“Never, in the vain-glory of my youth, or the glare of manhood, have I felt as I do now—thoroughly happy and contented. I think that for her sake, and through the unconscious teaching of my sweet daughter’s blameless life, the transformation will be made complete. Contrition for



past errors will be accepted, and all that she and other good women like her have prayed for in my behalf will come to pass. I am now learning, I speak with reverence, to pray for myself. I do not deserve all the blessings which have fallen to me, but I am not ungrateful. When I am with Blanche, I seem to hear a still small voice in the winds that sway my old tree tops, in the song of the birds, above all, in every tone of her voice, which teaches me what is better worth learning than all that I have wearied myself to acquire. In her simplicity she comprehends what nature is telling us in all her varying moods, only we are always in too great a hurry to stop and listen to her. May God help me, Harry, to make up to my poor little girl for all she has relinquished to render my home what it has been for the last six months! I am afraid I cannot as yet think of Heaven as complete unless she is there by my side; but, when I look at her and listen to her, I think that—sinner as I am and have been—there is yet a hope even for me of getting there. Meanwhile let us do our best to make our dear ones happy with us here on earth."

I believe that we have succeeded; at least Marguerite, when I repeated what I have now written, said it was so, and she always may be relied upon. Blanche has certainly recovered her serenity, and is what her father calls her—the Angel of the House. I do not think that she will ever



marry, or that she has now the slightest wish to form any ties which might estrange them from each other. The false shame which for a while tortured her is laid aside, and she is proud of her name and station as—

LORD MASKELYNE'S DAUGHTER.







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